

NOVEL

12

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE 2 YEAR

STORY: **SYO UGO**
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CLASSROOM **OF THE ELITE** **YEAR 2**

NOVEL 12



*"I see that none of your cronies
are with you today."*

*"Hah. Now that's unexpected.
What, you wanted a little
excitement?"*

*"I just felt like if Ibuki or Ishizaki
were here, this oppressive
atmosphere would've been
a little bit better."*

*"That's quite a thing to say seeing
as yer the one who invited me."*

*"Yes, I suppose you're probably
right."*

"Morning."

When I called out to her, her beautiful side profile turned toward me, and she gave me a lovely smile.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun. Are you sure this is all right? For you to call out to me in a place like this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there are people coming and going. Won't people get the wrong idea if someone in the area were to see us? Someone like Karuizawa-san?"





"Is it already your bedtime?"

"No, I just had things to do early this morning."

"Should I let you go, then?"

"Please do not say such a sad thing. I am fully prepared in anticipation of drowsiness."

"Fully prepared?"

"I have taken a bath, brushed my teeth, and even changed into my pajamas. I am already lying down, so I can sleep as soon as our call is finished."



12

WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2



CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE ^{YEAR} 2

NOVEL 12

STORY BY
Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY
Tomoseshunsaku



Seven Seas Entertainment



YOUKOSO JITSURYOKUSHIJOUSHUGI NO KYOUSHITSU E 2NENSEIHEN
VOL.12

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

12

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Chapter 1: Hoshinomiya Chie's Soliloquy

TO ME, SAE-CHAN is my best friend.

To me, Sae-chan is my rival.

It might seem like a contradiction on the face of it, but, surprisingly enough, that's the kind of relationship we have. Besides, I don't think it's that unusual to have two emotions running in parallel. Despite how it looks, I have quite a few friends. Friends from elementary school and junior high, friends I met in high school and college, and friends I came to know when I became a working adult. However, Sae-chan's the only person with whom I have an ongoing relationship, with whom I can talk honestly, about how I really feel. I don't know exactly what she thinks about it, though.

Even if I lose to someone else, I cannot lose to Sae-chan. The days that we spent together in the same class, aiming for Class A together, instilled such feelings in me. Originally, Sae-chan did not want to be a teacher. But that day, the day that we were made to understand that we wouldn't be able to graduate from Class A, I knew for certain that Sae-chan wanted to become a teacher to try to go for Class A in a different way. That's why I decided to aim to become a teacher too.

Frankly, this profession is a far cry from what I wanted to do. Day after day, I get made fun of and treated with contempt by arrogant students, and I can't expect much of a paycheck either. Even so, I still became a teacher.

I have only one goal: to keep Sae-chan from getting any hope of achieving her goal of graduating from Class A.

I mean, it's obvious why, right?

That day, we couldn't graduate from Class A anymore because of Sae-chan's trivial romance. Had it not been for that, I wouldn't have become a teacher and would have led a more glamorous life. And yet, Sae-chan is the only one to get her students to graduate from Class A?

And like that, she just squares up her past, with a sense of self-satisfaction?

I can't allow that.

Not when I'm still held prisoner by the past, even now.

So, as long as my eyes are on her, I will never let her win.

If my class loses in the End-of-Year Special Exam...

If Sae-chan's class ends up becoming Class A, then...

In the worst-case scenario, I will have to do whatever it takes to put a stop to it.

I don't care if I'm branded as an unfit teacher.

I don't even mind if I'm ousted from my teaching position.

I am definitely going to put a stop to it, even if I have to force my way through, to take her down with me.

That's what I had vowed to myself, deep down.

The special exam for the end of the second year will begin soon.

Depending on whether we win or lose this time, the fate of my class, which has been pushed to the brink, will be decided.

For both me and my students, an important battle that we absolutely cannot lose is about to begin.

Chapter 2: The Unusual End-of-Year Special Exam

THE SECOND WEEK OF MARCH. Thursday. The second year of our lives here at school has finally reached its climax. This past year has been just as intense and unforgettable, if not more so, than the first year. I would assume that there have been good times and bad times for many, but for those of us at this school, whether or not we safely overcome the next trial would determine how we saw this year. This is because the End-of-Year Special Exam itself is given an important position that distinguishes it from other special exams.

I would like to remind you of the special exam that was administered last year, our first year. It was the Event Selection Exam, which was conducted as a one-on-one class competition. The rules stipulated that, for every event won out of seven rounds, 30 Class Points could be taken from your opponent. Although the results were ultimately a close call, seven consecutive wins would add up to 210 Class Points. In addition, the winning class was rewarded with 100 Class Points. Which meant that a difference of up to 520 points could have been created between the winner and loser. That alone should give you an idea of how significant the special exams at the end of the year are.

“Morning.”

Chabashira-sensei appeared in the classroom, looking calm and collected. Morning greetings were returned here and there, sparsely. For the past few days, the students had been focused on what Chabashira-sensei would say after the morning greeting. After a series of nothings, it would appear that today was the day that it was finally time for things to start happening.

“I’m now going to inform you of the contents of the End-of-Year Special Exam,” she said. “But first, I’d like to speak to you on a personal level for a moment.”

We’d heard lots of things related to special exams thus far from Chabashira-sensei, our homeroom instructor. However, this time her opening was clearly different than usual.

“This year marks my eighth year here as a teacher at the Advanced Nurturing High School. I have been in charge of two classes in the past, six of which as their homeroom teacher, but in those six years, my class had never once moved up out of Class D. However, looking back on my words and actions from when I first came to this school, that isn’t particularly surprising,” said Chabashira-sensei.

It was a little difficult to imagine now, but Chabashira-sensei dealt with things in a cold and indifferent manner when I first came to the school. I knew a little more about her situation than the other students, so it wasn’t much of a story for me to ponder over.

“When I was in charge of my previous two classes, I had only one thing in mind: that I would continue to watch over them from a position of fairness and calmness, without any unnecessary emotions coming into play. I had continued to believe that it was right for me as a teacher to take a step back from my students, in good times and bad. Of course, this perspective is in line with the school’s educational ideology, and it’s not wrong. However, I now feel that it was also a way for me to escape from my inexperience as a teacher,” explained Chabashira-sensei.

The students were silent, hanging on to her words.

“Fairness is important. A teacher must not intervene in a class competition and distort the outcome. However, forgoing opportunities for students to grow is not the way things should be done, as a homeroom teacher, as an adult, and as a member of society. It is only recently that I have finally come to realize that.” She spoke introspectively, reflecting on her past actions. “It was you, the students of this class, who made me realize that. When you first arrived at this school, you may have heard that, in the past, it was natural for students in Class D to go on to the next grade level without ever rising above their rank. Before long, gossip began to spread rampantly and there were more and more cases of students that were assigned to Class D being ridiculed as ‘defective products.’”

She took a short pause, then continued.

“But now, there are no longer any students one could call defective. You could say that, with just this one class, you have completely wiped out the negative image that had been built up in the past,” said Chabashira-sensei, giving a compliment to the students.

Chabashira-sensei fiddled with her tablet and switched on the

monitor. It showed the rankings and status of each class as of March 1.

Class 2-A: 1098 points

Class 2-B: 983 points

Class 2-C: 730 points

Class 2-D: 654 points

To supplement what was shown onscreen, Class A was the class led by Sakayanagi, Class B was the class led by Horikita, Class C was the class led by Ryuuen, and Class D was the class led by Ichinose. Class Points fluctuated greatly when special exams were held, but during the ordinary months when nothing of note occurred, the number of points varied only slightly. When we first started here, Class Points were sometimes taken away due to things like tardiness, absences, and negative assessments that we couldn't see, but we could no longer expect to see any changes in the rankings due to factors like those. Looking at the Class Point rankings chart once more like this, it was easy to see how this class was on the upswing. And it wasn't only the students who felt this way.

"We have 983 Class Points," announced Chabashira-sensei. "It's an incredible number of points, no matter how many times I see the figure. I can't even imagine that this is a class that once lost all of its Class Points one scant month after starting school here."

Our teacher was similarly amazed looking at the rankings, but she hesitated for a moment, thinking back to two years ago.

"More importantly though, you're Class 2-B. Class *B*. No matter how many times I say that, I can't shake this feeling that there's something off about that, about being in that position. Class B is not the goal. Depending on the results of this End-of-Year Special Exam, there is even a possibility that this class could become Class A."

Currently, there was a gap of about one hundred points between us and Class A. The path to Class A, which Chabashira-sensei had only dreamed of—no, that she was not even allowed to dream of—was now within reach.

"But I don't want you to get cocky. Now that you're getting close to a point where the goal is in reach, I want you to keep pushing on

ahead toward your goal, without slacking off. This is a request from your inadequate teacher.” With that, Chabashira-sensei briefly bowed to the students. Then, she slowly raised her face back up, took a deep breath, and opened her eyes wide. “Now, I will give you a synopsis of the End-of-Year Special Exam.”

Chabashira-sensei’s words likely gave the students a sense of strength and steadfastness. No one was panicking, and they took her words to heart. As the teacher operated her tablet, the monitor displayed the contents of the special exam.

End-of-Year Special Exam

Exam Venue: Special Building

Class Match-Ups:

Class 2-A vs. Class 2-C

Class 2-B vs. Class 2-D

Preliminary Preparations:

Select three representatives from each class—a vanguard, a center, and a general—before the morning of the exam (at least one male student and one female student must be selected as representatives.)

A number of voluntary substitutes may be designated in the event of a representative’s absence on the day of the exam.

If there are fewer than three designated representatives, including substitutes, present on the day of the exam, the school will randomly select representatives.

Exam Rules

Representative Overview

A tournament-style system will be adopted, using representatives from each class (vanguard → center → general).

Vanguards are given five Life Points, centers are given seven Life Points, and generals are given ten Life Points.

The class whose general loses all of their Life Points first loses.

The exam will be conducted as a one-on-one competition with established rules.

There will be no ties, and the exam will be extended as necessary until a conclusion is reached.

The class match-ups (which we had already known about), a section labeled preliminary preparations, and extremely simple rules were displayed on the monitor. However, at this stage, it remained unclear what exactly the competition would entail.

“In preparation for the End-of-Year Special Exam, you have some important decisions to make. I’m sure that you can understand just from the information on the monitor, but I will explain verbally, just in case. Then, you will need to hold a class discussion to select your three representatives. These are extremely vital roles in determining who will win the special exam, so I would like for you to discuss the matter thoroughly and make a decision that none of you will regret,” said Chabashira-sensei.

Did that mean a class would lose once their three representatives were defeated? It was obvious that the test material would be important, regardless of what it was. Basically, it seemed as though we could select whomever we wished, but we needed to keep in mind that, because the only restriction placed on us was gender, it wasn’t possible to form a group of representatives made up of three boys or three girls. Also, apparently, we could set up replacements in the unlikely event that a representative is absent. In that case, it probably wouldn’t hurt to have several candidates, just to be safe.

“The order in which the representatives will fight is also determined by their designation: vanguard, center, and general,” explained Chabashira-sensei. “The representatives will fight each other in a single-elimination tournament-style format. In other words, the vanguards will compete against each other first, but the winning vanguard will continue with their current Life Point value and can continue to fight the opposing class’s center and general until that vanguard loses all of their Life Points. This is an extreme example, but if a single vanguard is able to defeat all three of the other representatives, including the general, then that vanguard’s respective class will win. If you put a student that you think is the most capable as your vanguard,

you may see such a scenario as a possibility, but...while it is possible, I do not recommend it.”

Although the scenario that Chabashira-sensei mentioned was like some overly sentimental heroic tale, realistically, it would be difficult to pull off. Considering that the general was given ten Life Points, more than the vanguard or the center, it was obvious to anyone that it was an overwhelmingly better idea to put the more capable students toward the back of the lineup. It was unlikely that putting leaders like Sakayanagi, Ryuen, or Ichinose in a forward position, like the vanguard, to launch a surprise attack would outweigh the definite advantages of putting them toward the rear. Of course, if this were an exam that favored the vanguard, that wouldn't be the case, but we couldn't predict that from what we currently knew about the exam rules. And, judging from Chabashira-sensei's attitude, it seemed like it was fair to ignore the slim possibility of that being the case.

“There isn't much time left for you to decide your representatives,” she added. “You have until Sunday at the end of the day. If you exceed this time limit, the school will select three students at random.”

That, of course, was just the school's standard procedure. Naturally, none of the classes were going to exceed the time limit.

“So, are you saying that...the three representatives alone will be who decides who wins or loses in this special exam?” asked Yousuke.

It wasn't surprising to think so, given the explanation we'd heard thus far. Yousuke was clearly concerned about that point.

“Yes, I suppose that's certainly how one would interpret it, based on these preliminary preparations and exam rules,” Chabashira-sensei said. “Of course, students other than the three representatives will also be given a significant role to play. All remaining students other than the representatives will be expected to fulfill their role properly according to their designation.”

“A...significant role?” asked Yousuke.

Chabashira-sensei tapped on her tablet and changed what was displayed on the monitor.

Exam Rules

Participant Overview

Students other than the representatives will be participants and take part in the exam.

If the number of participants falls below thirty-five because of absences due to illness or other reasons, a penalty will be incurred.

- * Penalty: Five Class Points will be paid per person.

- * For classes with thirty-six or more participants, five Class Points will be gained for each participant over thirty-five.

“All non-representatives are required to fulfill their role as participants in the special exam. Regarding the part of the overview that touches on penalties, there are thirty-eight people in this class. If you subtract the three representatives, that makes thirty-five. In other words, if even one person is absent, for any reason, the class will be penalized. Conversely, a class with extra people can handle unforeseen circumstances or receive some measure of benefit,” explained Chabashira-sensei.

Horikita’s class had thirty-eight students, and Sakayanagi’s class had thirty-seven, which meant they had no extra participants. Ryuen and Ichinose’s classes had forty people, so they would gain ten points. You couldn’t call that a huge amount of Class Points, even if you were being generous, but if the question was about getting points at all rather than their amount, that made an enormous difference. Being given those points would honestly be a welcome factor, regardless of the competition. We couldn’t lament that point being unfair, given the circumstances.

Ichinose’s class had been fighting for two years so far without losing a single person. Actually, if you looked at this aspect of the test as being a kind of reward for that, it wasn’t enough. Ryuen’s class had spent a lot of money to bring in Katsuragi after losing Manabe. Looking at it from their perspective, this situation wasn’t simply a gain for them either.

At any rate, the representatives were one thing, but the exact nature of the participant role was even more vague. The only thing that seemed to be clear was that the representatives and participants clearly had different roles. Just when I was thinking that we were going to be shown more details, the screen suddenly went black. Everyone seemed

to think that it was equipment trouble or user error but that apparently wasn't the case.

"And that is all that I can tell you right now," said Chabashira-sensei.

Horikita, who had been listening silently up until this point, spoke up in response to Chabashira-sensei's bizarre remark.

"What do you mean? Frankly, we still don't know a thing about what the special exam will entail," said Horikita.

"Yes, I understand," Chabashira-sensei said. "But it's as I just said. I cannot explain anything more than what I've told you thus far. I'm trying to be mean and hide it from you; I simply haven't been given the details by the school myself. More information will be revealed on the day of the special exam."

Unsurprisingly, the mood in the class immediately changed in response to that shocking statement. The fact that not even our homeroom teacher had been given the details was clearly out of the ordinary. It was an unprecedented announcement in our two years of being here.

"Your first task is to elect three representatives. There is no advantage in being a representative in and of itself, but at the same time, there is no disadvantage, either. To put it in simpler terms, you will not gain a large number of Private Points by accepting the role; however, you will not shoulder the risk of being expelled from school even if you lose," said Chabashira-sensei.

It seemed as though the only thing that was fully clear was that it was an important position.

"I understand that you don't know the rules either, sensei. But currently, we have no metrics upon which to decide our representatives. What should we base our selections on?" asked Yousuke.

"I wish I could tell you, but unfortunately, just like with the rules, I don't know anything about that either," said Chabashira-sensei. It sounded as though she hadn't even been informed of the selection criteria, and she wore a troubled expression as she told us what little she could predict. "While I can't state anything for absolutely certain, given the fact that it'll be a situation where students compete against each other regardless if they're a boy or girl, and that the testing venue will be the special building, it seems unlikely that it'll be a competition

of physical ability.”

She couldn’t make any guarantees, but her guess was probably correct given the location and the roles. In that case, I wondered if we should steer in the opposite direction and go with more studious types to be the representatives. Most likely, the answer to that question was “no.” If, hypothetically, the competition was based solely on academic ability, it was hard to imagine that information would be withheld from us. A one-on-one match, competing in something that was based neither on studies nor physical activity. So then, what in the world was it about?

“...Fighting by way of dialogue... Could something like that be a possibility, then?” Horikita muttered that question aloud, half speaking to herself as she rose from her chair.

“That’s conceivable enough, sure,” said Chabashira-sensei.

She couldn’t say for certain that was so, but she couldn’t deny the potential that the competition would be in the form of a debate or something similar. If smooth communication skills were required, then students like Yousuke and Kushida would probably be the top choices. Even if the exam content had nothing to do with dialogue, if those two were selected, they’d be able to handle the task flexibly thanks to their high levels of overall ability. In short, you could say that this was a situation where students who could compete regardless of the exam content were the ones who should be selected.

“Now, as for the all-important rewards, the winning class will get 200 points,” Chabashira-sensei said, continuing her explanation. “If you lose, you will simply receive no reward at all. However, the results will also reflect choices made in the Unanimous Special Exam, so in your case, if you win, you’ll get 250 Class Points.”

The first thing I understood from what she said was that no one would be losing any Class Points even if they lost. Not having to worry about being robbed was a silver lining, but it made no difference if the gap was wide. Given that the rewards to be gained were so great, the damage to the loser would still be considerable if they were left behind. For Ichinose’s class in particular, it would put their back to the wall, with nowhere to go even apart from the exam. If her class ended up getting further separated from the top in terms of Class Points, then the outlook would become quite bleak for them, as it would be difficult to see just how much her class could turn things around and recover even

if they won all of the special exams over the next year.

“That is all for my explanation. As soon as you have decided upon your representatives, come talk to me,” said Chabashira-sensei.

With that, Chabashira-sensei was finished.

2.1

I REMINISCED A BIT about the time that I talked to Hashimoto while I was walking back from school together with Kei. The End-of-Year Special Exam was finally approaching, set for next week. We didn’t know the details of the rules yet, but I could say that the fluctuation in Class Points was clearly significant. The winner would smile while the loser would likely cry. In that regard, the exam would be a win-lose type of situation, so no matter who the victors and losers were, that reaction was to be expected.

But there was one point that was not part of the original plan. Namely, the matter of Sakayanagi and Ryuuen’s wager, that the loser would drop out of school regardless of the special exam content. As stated in the rules, there would be no ties, and thus a clear winner would be determined. That meant that one of them would disappear from this school once the special exam came to an end. I could say that my envisioned goal of entering our third year with all four classes having the potential to be Class A had essentially been destroyed.

Regardless of which class won or lost, I had laid the groundwork to deal with the situation. Regarding those who were difficult to replace, such as Sakayanagi and Ryuuen, I planned to lend a helping hand when they were in danger of being eliminated, and in truth, I have done just that. I supposed that it wasn’t normal to leave the possibility open for all four classes to be in reach of Class A in the first place. Considering the nature of the school’s competitions, the students probably wouldn’t *want* to have a close, contested rivalry with another class.

That was precisely why students would win when they were capable and always did their absolute best. Both Horikita Manabu and Nagumo Miyabi had constructed a system that utilized a single

dominant player who has stuck out beyond the results of those efforts. If not, wouldn't two of the classes, Class A and Class B, engage in one-on-one combat against each other? The history of this school should have been simply a repetition of that exact scenario.

It was with that in mind that I had decided to create a four-way competition among the classes, in order to overturn that foundation. That certainly *was* one of the futures that I had envisioned, but...

While it might've been possible to have their wager rescinded before being put into action in the upcoming competition, a third party should not cut into something that two people have agreed upon. What should I do if it's already been decided that one of them will be going away in the near future, then? Both Ryuen's class and Sakayanagi's class had talented, capable people in them, who made for a solid class when grouped together. However, even so, they were not capable enough to replace the current leaders.

The equilibrium would surely crumble. If it became impossible to keep the four in balance, what would the best course of action be? Would I have to make decisions by the time the results of the End-of-Year Special Exam were available, including the decisions that I had put on hold?

"Hey, Kiyotaka..."

Kei spoke quietly as she walked alongside me, muttering at such a low volume, it was like her words were scattered droplets.

"What's up?" I asked.

When I replied with that brief question, she looked at me with a surprised expression, even though she was the one who had spoken to me.

"Hey, um, so, you know. The movie...I'm looking forward to it," she said.

"Yeah, that's right," I replied.

Even though I replied to her, Kei seemed rather aloof.

"You were thinking about something, right?" she asked.

"Sorry. Maybe I was just feeling distracted, I guess?" I answered. "I was thinking about the special exam."

I wasn't aware of making any particular facial expressions or

gestures, but I figured that Kei might have picked up on something intuitively. Although, it seemed safe to say that it was a sense developed from spending a growing period of time together as lovers, rather than an individual ability on her part.

“I guess it’s not something I should be thinking about when we’re walking back to the dorms together, huh. Are you mad?” I asked.

“No, it’s not like that,” she said. “It’s just...are you going to be helping the class this time, by any chance?”

“Not sure. Right now I’m giving things a lot of thought. But if you’ve got anything you want to talk about Kei, I’m all ears.”

It seemed to me like she was hiding her true intentions, so I switched my attention to Kei’s recent situation. However, Kei seemed to be taking a step back from it.

“No, no, don’t worry about me,” she said. “The final exam is, like, a super important exam, after all. But I’m sure that if you take it seriously, Kiyotaka, our class will definitely win. And if we get 250 Class Points, then we might even end up being Class A, right?”

She flashed a smile, essentially telling me, “*So I don’t want to bother you.*”

Of course, it was as plain as day that this admirable consideration on her part was just for show, but I decided to not hesitate to take advantage of it.

“In that case, can we cancel our date this weekend?” I asked. “I’ll make it up to you next week, of course.”

“Well, okay, that’s fine, I guess,” she replied. “But...do we really have to cancel, though? Personally, I’d rather be with you this week *and* next week.”

“If possible, I’d like to meet and talk with each class leader before the final exam.”

In fact, there were several other people I wanted to contact in addition to the four class leaders, but I decided that it wasn’t necessary to mention that part here.

“Each class leader... Wait, you mean not just Horikita-san, then?” asked Kei.

Normally, one would only focus their efforts on making sure their

own class won, so it wasn't unreasonable for Kei to think that having a discussion just with Horikita would've been enough.

"All four of them. Do you not like the idea of me meeting with Ichinose?" I asked.

"Uh..." stammered Kei. I had hit the nail on the head, and she had reflexively reacted with a start, flustered. "No, no, it's not like... Well, I mean, it's not *not* like that, I guess... Of course I don't like it, obviously... But it's necessary for you, right, Kiyotaka?"

"It is very important this particular time," I replied.

When I responded to her, with words of confirmation and a nod, Kei nodded back, albeit reluctantly.

"I guess if you had something you needed to hide, something to feel guilty about, you could contact her and meet her while keeping quiet about it. You could do that as much as you wanted to. But you made sure to ask me for permission, so..." muttered Kei, seeming as though she was trying to convince herself while talking to me. Finally, she asked me for confirmation. "I can believe you, right?"

"I'm meeting with the leaders of each class this time because I want to see what happens in the future. Nothing more, nothing less," I replied.

Even if I told Kei my true intentions here, there was no way that she'd feel like everything was cleared up anyway. Looking back on how Kei had been acting recently, something had clearly begun to change from how things used to be. Of course, it was obvious that I was the cause of that. A romantic relationship fundamentally requires both trusting your partner and being trusted by your partner.

However, cracks were beginning to appear in the relationship. The impetus for something like that to happen were varied: money, violence, infidelity, even simply being stuck in a rut in the relationship. There were innumerable reasons why a relationship may fail. But even so, you couldn't just question your partner that easily.

Do you not love me anymore?

Have you fallen in love with someone else?

Have you gotten bored of me?

Even if you had something on your mind, it took courage to say it to your partner. And supposing you did voice your concerns, there's no

guarantee that the problem would be resolved.

“Okay. I won’t say anything more about it, then,” said Kei. “And I don’t need a detailed report about it, either.”

That seemed to be her way of telling me that she didn’t want to question me about what we talked about when I met with them.

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” I replied.

Now I could deal with the End-of-Year Special Exam freely.

“So, hey, um, could I...stay over today?” asked Kei.

The only thing that I could do for Kei, who had trouble putting those kinds of things into words, was to stay with her for as long as possible. I figured that she wanted to do what she could in the time that we shared and wanted to somehow hold onto me as her partner, to keep me tied down. I didn’t have any particular reason to refuse her at the moment. As long as there wasn’t any heartache, no disadvantage would arise for me. Even so, I decided to turn her down.

“No, let’s not do that this week. I’ll be too busy coming up with a strategy for the end of the school year,” I replied.

I was entering the preparatory stages to sever hopes, rather than giving an expectation that hopes could survive. Because no matter how thin or how brittle the thread, Kei would risk it all and try to reach and grab hold of it.

“...Not even...for a little bit?” she asked.

“Not even for a little bit, no. Because I’d feel bad if I could only do things half-heartedly with you,” I replied.

But Kei continued speaking, not giving up, almost as though she really were trying to hang onto me tightly and not let go.

“Well, I’m fine with that, even if it’s just to serve you, Kiyotaka... I-I’ll work hard to make you like me even more!” she protested.

When I glanced over at Kei in response, as if showing her sympathy, she bit her lip a little and closed her eyes.

“I’m sorry...” she said. “You said no, after all, Kiyotaka, and here I’m being like this. I’m sorry for being selfish during such an important time, with the final special exam and all.”

“It’s okay. Let’s go to the movies together after the exam is over,” I offered.

Kei nodded, quietly saying, “Okay.”

2.2

KEI AND I WALKED into the dormitory building and parted ways in front of the elevator. I had one goal to accomplish in the three-day period starting tomorrow, Friday, and ending on Sunday. Namely, to meet with the leaders of each class: Horikita, Ichinose, Ryuen, and Sakayanagi. If I closely examined the contents of the End-of-Year Special Exam, I would say that it was highly unlikely that it would end peacefully, with no one getting hurt.

How will you deal with this? What are you going to do in the future? I wanted to make a final confirmation, taking into account my future course. Who I met with first didn’t matter to me, but...

While I was giving it some thought while looking at my cell phone, I noticed that I had received a single message. Apparently, there was someone who already wanted to meet with me, without me having to call them. Moreover, since they didn’t specify the date, time, or even location, that meant I wouldn’t have to deal with the hassle of extra correspondence. I responded, consenting readily, and decided to re-think the order of my appointments with the leaders.

Although I didn’t intend to be particular about the order, sometimes it was better to be a little careful about those things in order to accomplish certain goals at the same time. Once I had returned to my room, I immediately sent messages to the leaders of each class. I asked three of them—everyone but Horikita—if we could meet somewhere on Saturday or Sunday. As for Horikita, I worded the message a little bit differently and asked if we could meet sometime between Friday and Sunday.

Of course, I wasn’t going to mention at the start that I was planning to meet with everyone or what exactly the conversation would be about, since it wouldn’t be strange if some of the students were wary and wanted to keep their distance. The first one to read the message was Ryuen. Though, he was also the person who I wouldn’t be least surprised to get a decline from...

“I’ll make some time for you tomorrow after class.”

Around the time that I was setting my bag down on the table, I saw Ryuuken’s reply. I figured that he was proposing Friday because his schedule for Saturday and Sunday was full, but it was somewhat disconcerting that he couldn’t even make a little time for me during the weekend proper. However, it didn’t seem like there was any deep meaning behind it, and that he was simply rejecting my specific designation for Saturday or Sunday. That was also rather like Ryuuken, more or less.

Well, I supposed that if I could arrange to meet with Horikita first, then Friday wouldn’t be a problem. I casually sent a reply, asking about where we should meet. Ultimately, we settled on heading over to a karaoke room at 7 p.m. Afterward, Ichinose responded and suggested that we could meet up somewhere early on Sunday, since she had plans with a friend later that day. I replied that it was no problem.

About an hour later, Horikita had also contacted me. I was sure it was obvious to her what this was about, but I had added a statement saying that I’d be grateful if we could talk about the exam. Horikita said that she didn’t mind any particular time or place, so we decided to meet at a café in Keyaki Mall tomorrow, Friday, after class.

The remaining person, Sakayanagi, asked if I wouldn’t mind talking to her over the phone on Sunday night, as her weekend appeared to be completely booked full of prior engagements. I had thought that I would like to meet and speak in person, if at all possible, but I figured that a phone call wouldn’t be much of an issue, so I replied to Sakayanagi to say that would be fine.

On Friday evening, I would meet with Horikita at a café in Keyaki Mall.

On Friday night, I would visit Ryuuken in a karaoke room.

On Sunday morning, I would meet Ichinose on a bench just outside of the gym, on the path to school.

On Sunday night, I would talk to Sakayanagi on the phone.

There were other things I wanted to do as well, but talking to those four was imperative. Just like that, I had established my schedule.

Chapter 3:

What Ought to Be Finished

KKEYAKI MALL CHANGED drastically on Fridays after class compared to how things are on weekdays. After five days of working hard on their studies, the students joyfully entered the lead-up into the days off that awaited them. However, this week specifically, things looked a little different than normal. Perhaps it was the noticeably smaller number of students inside the mall.

When I arrived at the café, I saw that Horikita, who had left the classroom before me, was already waiting there for me. When Horikita noticed me, she gestured that she wanted to order a drink, and we went over to the cashier. I purchased one hot coffee and joined her. Horikita looked somewhat restless, fidgeting about in the seat across from me.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“...The ‘matter’?” she asked in return.

“I mean, it just seemed to me like there was something bothering you. If I’m wrong about that though, then that’s good,” I replied.

“Maybe it’s my body language?” she asked.

“Yeah, it is,” I replied.

“I see,” said Horikita. “It’s nothing really, I was just thinking a little about next week’s exam. I’m sorry if I worried you.”

“So you’re saying that you’re nervous right now, at this current stage?” I asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be? The fluctuation in Class Points is going to be significant. Whether our class goes up or down, it’s a big turning point either way,” said Horikita.

And also, the more she became aware of her role as the leader, the more she would think about that sort of thing. That was understandable, I suppose, and a moderate feeling of tension wasn’t a bad thing at all.

“By the way...have you noticed how few first-years are around?” she asked.

Perhaps she wanted to change the subject, because she asked me that question while avoiding my gaze.

“Yeah. I suppose that the time has finally come for our juniors to undergo the trials and tribulations of an end-of-year special exam too, huh?” I answered.

Looking at the inside of the café alone, you could see that there were very few first-year students. Judging from the way things were looking this weekend, a considerably tough special exam might have been issued to them.

“It feels like the days and months went by slowly yet quickly. I can’t believe that a year has passed already since they came to this school,” said Horikita.

So said the second-year student, who was only a year older than those first-years, speaking somewhat philosophically, as though taking a farsighted view while she took a sip of her drink.

“That’s kinda like an old person way of talking,” I replied.

“Okay, ‘old person’? Rude. I wonder if you could have phrased that a little bit better,” said Horikita, the slightly sweet scent of her black tea wafting across the table along with her grumbling words.

“That’s unusual, for you to have milk tea,” I observed.

“I was in the mood for a little sugar. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking,” said Horikita.

That was because when you were a class leader, you had to put more thought into things than anyone else.

“I wonder what kind of exam the school is making the first-years take,” mused Horikita.

“Who knows? If you’re curious, why don’t you capture a first-year and ask them?”

“There’s no way I could shift my attention to another grade level until I hear from someone about that. Besides, it’s not right for an upperclassman to intrude on the special exam of an unrelated grade level just out of curiosity, right?” said Horikita.

That wasn’t the case when you were being asked for advice, but yes, Horikita was right. That was a problem that should be handled by people within the same grade level. Of course, there were times when

people would rely on an upperclassman or junior if they had to in order to survive, but you could say that such examples were rare.

“Putting the matter of what’s on their exam aside, do you know what the class situation is for the first-years?” asked Horikita.

“I’m sure that the rankings haven’t changed for them since enrollment, from classes A to D,” I replied.

With the tacit understanding that we were not to interfere too deeply in their affairs, the only thing that Horikita and I could do was look at the information disclosed by the school and share it.

“Yes, you’re right. It seems that Yagami from Class B was expelled from school for a matter unrelated to special exams. There was a big penalty, but the gap between his class and classes C and D was too large for that to change the rankings. But now that the gap between Class 1-A and Class 1-B has opened up, and it appears that Class 1-A has started to pull ahead little by little, indisputably,” said Horikita.

Horikita then turned the screen of her phone toward me without even having to tap it.

Class Points as of March 1

Class 1-A: 991 points

Class 1-B: 697 points

Class 1-C: 532 points

Class 1-D: 510 points

It looked as though Horikita had investigated the matter in her spare time while waiting for me.

“We weren’t that different at this point last year, either. But the bottom three classes in their case appear to be pretty close, so it seems possible that there could be a big turnaround depending on the long-awaited End-of-Year Special Exam,” remarked Horikita.

Depending on the rewards and the competition format, and depending on the case, the chances that Class 1-A and Class 1-D could switch places weren’t zero. I didn’t recall the detailed figures from last year, but I believed that both Horikita and Ryuuken’s classes were hovering around 350 points. And this year’s first-years were doing quite

well, considering that even Class 1-D still had over 500 points now, after starting with 800 points.

“Just from looking at the Class Points they have, it looks like they’re exceptional, better than we were last year. I’m curious to see how the first-years are holding their classes together,” I replied.

That was my honest assessment after looking at the rankings and points. Class A seemed to be led by either Takahashi or Ishigami, while Class D had a clear leader in Housen. But Classes B and C didn’t appear to have clear leaders at this point. Tsubaki and Utomiya from Class C are both memorable students, but there was little evidence that they were taking actions to lead their class at present. Also, although Yagami was leading the way for Class B, it was currently unclear on how things had changed in his class since his expulsion.

“Yes, they certainly may have a high number of Class Points, but that doesn’t mean we can assume that they’re exceptional overall because of that, can we? The special exams they’re being given are different from what we had last year. The environment they’re in is different as well, so we can’t easily judge them based on point values alone,” argued Horikita, perhaps displeased with me praising our juniors.

“Yes, ability may be another matter, I suppose. It might simply be that there were just more burdens in our grade level last year dragging us down, like Sudou at the start of the year, compared to other grade levels,” I replied.

“...I wouldn’t go that far. That’s a mean thing to say,” snapped Horikita. She had been the one to bring up the topic of the first-year students, but she seemed to have no intention of continuing the discussion any further, because she turned off her phone’s screen and took another sip from her cup.

“I’d like to move onto the main topic. Should I hear it from you first? Or should I come out and talk about the End-of-Year Special Exam?” asked Horikita.

I guess talking about the first-years and what they would deal with might have made her feel a bit more relaxed about our year’s ordeal.

“Let’s start with the exam. I wanted to talk about that too, anyway,” I replied.

“I figured that was probably what this was about. If that’s the case, I appreciate it,” said Horikita, her eyes creasing happily. She seemed pleased about the fact that I had contacted her myself in regard to the special exam. “Okay, well, then... First of all, do you think there are any steps that we can take to gain an advantage in this special exam at this time?”

As soon as she asked that, however, she immediately shook her head lightly from side to side, as if she were correcting herself.

“Let me put that in a more straightforward way. What do you think our chances of success are?” asked Horikita, rephrasing her question.

In this case, I actually much preferred that to being asked in a confusing, roundabout way.

“Honestly, it’s hard to say,” I replied. “The content and scope of the exam, based on what we can predict from the information revealed to us by the school, seems quite broad and difficult to narrow down. Without specifics, we can’t come up with a strategy that will lead us to victory.”

To put it bluntly, it would only be a waste of resources to rack our brains and come up with guesses about what the test would be like when there were hundreds or thousands of possible scenarios.

“...Yes, I suppose you’re right. Even Chabashira-sensei doesn’t know the details of the exam. There’s no way for us to produce countermeasures,” said Horikita.

If she was expecting advice from me, normally, Horikita would be disappointed. But for some reason, her expression seemed pleased.

“You look happy. I was expecting the opposite reaction,” I remarked.

“Really? It makes me happy, though. This is a special exam where I have no idea what will happen, but I guess I was expecting you to say, ‘I have an idea of how to win.’ My dissatisfaction with that would’ve been bigger than my hopes, so I guess I was a little relieved,” she said. Then she quickly appended her statement, saying, “That’s why I am happy to hear you say that. You have this air about you, like you’re quite likely to say outrageous stuff like that, after all.”

I didn’t remember having an air of any sort, but I wasn’t going to

comment on that.

“As long as we don’t know what the exam will be about, then everyone should be in the same boat. Sakayanagi and Ryuen are no different in that regard,” I replied.

“I suppose you’re right. In other words...there’s nothing we can do until the details are announced?” asked Horikita.

“Just about all we can do is carefully select three representatives who are likely to produce solid results, regardless of the content,” I answered.

It would probably be better to select students with the fewest shortcomings from among the class.

“Or you could take a gamble and go for an all-or-nothing situation by including a student with clear strengths and weaknesses,” I added.

“That’s...a little scary,” said Horikita.

“Yeah, I’m sure it is. That’s precisely why I’m sure that every class will focus on having a solid lineup instead,” I replied.

“While if asked directly, I would have to agree that the exam is fair, it’s still frustrating,” huffed Horikita.

It seemed like there would be a lot of time spent seeking answers to the unanswerable question of whether there was anything we could do at this current stage.

“The more you try to reason your way through exams and try to figure out a way forward, the more you’ll feel stuck,” I replied. “So, at times like this, it might be interesting to try to change your perspective a little.”

“What do you mean?” asked Horikita.

“Even if you don’t know what the exam will be about, you can at least imagine who your opponents will be, can’t you? If I were a student in the class that you’re up against, I could easily imagine that you would naturally be the general, Horikita, and that students like Yousuke and Kushida would be first choices as vanguard and center,” I answered.

“...Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

In fact, the names I had just mentioned should have been candidates that Horikita had in mind right now.

"In that case, who would you imagine from Ichinose's class?" I asked. "There's no doubt that Ichinose would likely be the general, but who else?"

"Well, sure enough, I would think that Kanzaki-kun would be a solid pick. No one else who stands out comes to mind, but people like Hatsukawa-san, Hamaguchi-kun, and Niiura-kun seem like they would be good enough candidates. But..." said Horikita.

The look on Horikita's face said, "*But what does that tell us?*"

"If you can narrow down who your opponents will be, you can then at least try to find their weak points. Now, this is nothing more than an example scenario, but let's assume that the person you just named, Hatsukawa, has a strong crush on Miyake Akito. If that were the case, then if we intentionally chose Miyake with that in mind, then we might make Hatsukawa unable to make decisions like normal," I replied.

"So you're talking about 'chemistry' then?" asked Horikita.

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm talking about," I replied.

"But I can't imagine that chemistry would affect the outcome of the exam so much as to easily determine a winner, and—"

"I didn't say that it'd be particularly easy," I cut her off. "When it's difficult to make a breakthrough, first, try to change your point of view. After that, you can decide whether you think it's a good or bad idea."

I needed to make sure that Horikita knew that some things can quickly come into view just by slightly changing where you stood.

"I will keep that in mind," said Horikita.

Her words were straightforward and accepting, but she must not have liked something about that, as she had a somewhat disapproving look in her eyes.

"You seem to have a lot of thoughts on the matter, so I'm going to ask you a question. You mentioned me, Hirata-kun, and Kushida-san. Do you think that we three would be good representatives?" asked Horikita.

"That is something that you, Horikita, as the linchpin and person worthy of leading the class, have to think about yourself," I replied.

"I was thinking that first, I'd listen to what those around me have

to say. That's why we're talking now," said Horikita.

The way she said that sounded a bit roundabout and pompous, like she was trying to make a show of her wit. In that case, I guess I'd give her an answer.

"The representatives for the class will have a definite one-on-one structure. Meaning it is better to choose students who can fight as individuals rather than the type of student who can demonstrate their abilities when they're with multiple people. In addition, we would want to exclude students who specialize in physical abilities, like Sudou and Onodera. Yousuke and Kushida are capable even in a group, but they're skilled enough to be flexibly adaptable even on their own. I would say that they are safe choices," I told her.

"That's an uninteresting answer. It's like something you'd find written in a textbook. I'd like a little more individuality," said Horikita.

"You already have a plan in mind without even relying on my input, don't you?" I asked.

We had until the end of Sunday to determine the representatives. If she hadn't narrowed down the candidates by now, then we wouldn't be having this conversation.

"Well, somewhat. That said, there aren't many people that seem like they can be entrusted with this responsibility. My opinion is almost the same as yours. It's inevitable that Hirata-kun and Kushida-san would be the first-choice candidates. However, we can't honestly say that they are the best choices," said Horikita.

"Okay then, what would you say is the best lineup?" I asked.

At my question, she directed a gloomy gaze at me.

"If you, Ayanokouji-kun, along with Kouenji-kun, would accept the position, I would just leave it to you," said Horikita.

Horikita's vision for the lineup of three representatives: Horikita, Ayanokouji, and Kouenji. Huh. It was true that if the wishes of the people selected weren't a factor, then that lineup might've been ideal.

"Even if I put aside the matter of you for a moment, I can't help but find myself thinking, 'If only Kouenji-kun would honestly accept the task,' in times like these," said Horikita.

"Yeah, if he were to take things seriously, coupled with his wild intuition, I'm sure he'd blow through the competition," I replied.

“Yes, absolutely,” said Horikita, agreeing vehemently.

It might’ve even been possible for him to enter the competition as the vanguard and take out the others, going all the way up to general. Of course, if he was nominated against his will, there was a substantial risk that he would let himself be defeated without even putting up a fight. If anything, that was the only way I could see it unfolding.

“But I know better than to hope for that,” Horikita said. “Regarding the matter of Kouenji-kun, I’ve already admitted that I’ll just be watching him quietly until graduation. It isn’t realistic for me to even request that he be a representative, unless he comes out and volunteers for it himself.”

It sounded like the odds were so slim that Horikita wasn’t even going to try to talk to him. That was the right move on her part though, and she shouldn’t be carelessly hopeful in her recruitment calls. After all, it was Kouenji, and it wouldn’t be unusual for him to say that something like that was a breach of contract and then make unreasonable demands.

“Even if it’s impossible to go with him, I would feel comfortable leaving it to you, if you would accept, but...” said Horikita.

She shot a fleeting glance over at me, as if she were consulting an oracle.

“Do you think that I would accept?” I asked.

“I don’t, no,” she replied.

“You don’t think so, huh? Actually, if you wanted me to, I wouldn’t mind accepting the role, though.”

“Yes, I figured as much. After all, I knew it’s not something that you’d say yes so easy—huh?” blinked Horikita.

Horikita was about to finish her statement, but then she froze, with her mouth hanging open.

“What did you just say?” she asked.

“I just said that I’d be willing to accept, if that’s what you want, Horikita,” I told her.

Even though I repeated myself, her mouth still kept opening and closing silently, as though her brain hadn’t processed the information yet.

“R-really? You’re not joking?” she asked.

“I don’t make jokes that aren’t funny. It’d be too much of a hassle if you took a lie like that seriously,” I answered.

“I suppose, but... Well, um, if you could take on the role of representative, it would be an immense help to not just me, but the entire class. Are you really sure you’re okay with this?” asked Horikita.

Horikita repeatedly asked me for confirmation, but there was already a bright sparkle in her eyes. I decided to add something important, even though it might dim that sparkle.

“I’m sure. However, I have a few conditions,” I replied.

Naturally, for Horikita, “conditions” was a word that raised alarm.

“...And what would those be? Difficult conditions?” she asked.

“I’m not so sure about that. The question of whether your pride would allow it is also relevant, Horikita,” I replied.

“My pride? Can you elaborate on that?” she asked.

Even though I told her that there were conditions, she seemed very willing to consider appointing me as a representative, so I kept talking.

“I’m sure that in almost one hundred percent of cases, each of the class leaders will be participating in the exam as the general for their respective class,” I began.

“Yes, that’s true. The general has the most Life Points, meaning they can make more mistakes, which in turn means that to be a vanguard or center would be to give up that advantage. That much is obvious,” said Horikita.

With that understood, I moved on to talk about the matter of pride.

“The present leader of the class is you, Horikita. Unmistakably so,” I said. “With that in mind, one of the conditions I have for my accepting the role is that I would like for you to be the center in the lineup, and that you have me as the general.”

“You as the general...?” she asked.

She didn’t need to think too deeply about what that would mean. It would make people think that the real leader of the class wasn’t Horikita, but myself.

“As I said before, it’s quite likely, with almost one hundred percent certainty, the other classes will have Ichinose, Ryuen, and Sakayanagi as their respective generals. They will want to fight with as much life as possible,” I explained.

Horikita listened to my words, then nodded.

“In other words, if I’m the general, there would be students from not just our class but the other classes that will likely have some thoughts about the matter. Some of them may even see you as being an unreliable leader, Horikita.”

“That’s putting it very mildly. But you’re probably right. In this exam, it’s inevitable that the student who sits in the general’s seat would be the most talented student in the class,” said Horikita.

“Right. Which is why whether or not you are willing to accept that is a prerequisite for me being a representative,” I added.

I would respect Horikita’s wishes, of course. If anything, I would see it as something to be glad about if she wished to be the general herself in this case, as I could take that to mean that she has begun to have a keen sense of herself as the leader.

“And if I said that the position of general was the only thing I wouldn’t give up?” asked Horikita.

“Then I guess I’d just say no to the whole thing,” I replied.

If Horikita rejected the terms of the proposal, then I wouldn’t be a representative, of course.

“Pride, huh. I see your point. To be perfectly honest, I personally don’t really care too much whether I’m the general or not, as long as I can win. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t care about it at *all*, mind you,” said Horikita.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I responded. “Actually, if that weren’t the case, we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now.”

It wasn’t as though pride itself was something that had any value. But a leader with pride, that was a different matter.

“Can you tell me the reason you won’t accept the role if you’re not the general?” She asked. “Is it simply because you’re better than me?”

“No, It’s much simpler than that,” I answered. “I just don’t want to have to take a turn.”

“So you’re saying that you’re willing to be a representative, but you don’t want to fight if you can help it?” she asked.

“That’s right,” I replied.

When I gave her that answer without any hesitation, Horikita scowled, furrowing her brow as she tried to search for the point of my inclusion as a representative if that was how I felt.

“That’s... I would have to wonder how much good that would even do for me. If I have you as the general, right now, that would probably make me the center. And if I am to fight in such a way that you won’t have to take a turn, then that means I’m going to have to fight quite a grueling battle,” said Horikita.

“Yes, it certainly would put you at a disadvantage, that’s true. From the start, the number of mistakes you’ll be allowed to make will be reduced, which is a significant handicap. Furthermore, in order to win as the center, you’ll have to cut down a lot of Life Points very quickly to defeat all of the opponents,” I explained.

It wasn’t surprising that Horikita would have doubts after hearing all of that. By telling her that I would accept only if I were given the role of general, and that I wanted her to make sure I didn’t have to take a turn, I was giving her even more considerations to take into account. Of course, it would be quicker if Horikita could just win it all herself, but things weren’t that easy.

“By the way, judging from your wording earlier, that wasn’t the only condition, was it?” asked Horikita.

Horikita, still unable to come to a conclusion, asked to check what came beyond that first condition. I had no intention of rushing her, for my part.

“Okay, let’s put the whole general thing on hold and move on, shall we?” I told her. “I also want a reward in exchange for accepting the position of representative.”

“Private Points?” asked Horikita.

“No, I’m not looking for those. What I want is the same thing as Kouenji. That is, from now on, I won’t contribute anything to the class. I will not cooperate. I want you to allow for that,” I explained.

“...That’s...” she started.

I think that this was something she had never expected...

Actually, no. Rather, I think that it's something she didn't want to think about. Horikita was probably willing to accept a certain level of compensation, but she choked on her words as she tried to respond to my condition.

"You're saying some truly ridiculous things. What, you're telling me to let you run completely free, like Kouenji-kun?" asked Horikita.

It wasn't anger pouring out of Horikita, it was dismay.

"You've been engaging in discussion with me lately, and you've even started to contribute a little to the class, and yet here you are telling me that you won't even cooperate from now on...?" she huffed.

"I understand that you don't like it. But I have my own thoughts, and that's exactly why I've made this proposal," I explained.

"Can I ask you something?" asked Horikita. "You said you have your own thoughts. What are those, exactly?"

"I'm not dead set on getting up to Class A in the first place. I don't especially care if I graduate from my current class, or Class C, or Class D. Can't you understand that someone like that wouldn't feel the need to work desperately hard and cooperate in order to move up to Class A?" I asked.

"...I suppose you're right," said Horikita.

"And I'm not as particular about Private Points as Kouenji either. I even feel like what I get from our current amount of Class Points is more than enough. I wouldn't even be bothered if they were reduced by half," I answered.

I told her that even if we lost because I didn't help, that would still be an acceptable situation for me.

"Okay then, why is it that you've lent me a hand every now and then before now?" asked Horikita.

"Because the class becoming stable is the best thing that I could ask for. You and your classmates have matured, Horikita," I explained. "I've simply decided that we've reached a point where I can get by with letting go and allowing you and the others to manage things."

"I honestly have no idea where to start when it comes to your statements, but... I understand what you are trying to say. You mean that after you help with this End-of-Year Special Exam, you want to relax and enjoy the rest of your time as a student, right?" asked

Horikita.

“Yep, that’s it,” I said. “But I have no intention of making that particular demand right now, just from taking on the position of general. As long as I’m the general, I promise not to ask for what I just explained right now, about leaving me alone as a reward, as long as you keep winning and make sure they don’t get past our center, thus keeping me from having to take a turn.”

“...Which means you’ll only be demanding *that* condition if you’re forced to take your turn as the general and lead our class to victory then, basically?” asked Horikita.

“Yeah. Oh, but keep in mind that even if you get the general for the other class, probably Ichinose, down to one remaining Life Point, and I still have to come in and win it, you’ll still have to keep your promise,” I explained.

Horikita needed to always keep a development like that in mind, namely, the notion of someone profiting while others fight. It was a proposal that would normally get rejected, unsurprisingly. That was precisely why I mentioned it as an important part.

“So, supposing if, hypothetically, I do take a turn as the general, and we lose the exam, then in that case, as long as I remain your classmate thereafter, I promise to help you the next time... Actually, no, I promise to cooperate with you for the next six months,” I declared.

I promised to help her for the next half a year in exchange if I were defeated. That shouldn’t have been a bad offer from Horikita’s perspective.

“Even in the unlikely event that you lose, I can gain your cooperation for a while... You really have come to me seeking a deal with terms similar to what Kouenji-kun did, haven’t you?” said Horikita.

“Actually, I believe my proposal is even better than what Kouenji offered. Unless I were to get expelled in the middle of the year or something else would cause me to leave your class, Horikita, I’m going to be cooperating with you for six months,” I added.

“Why not say you’ll do it until graduation, instead of saying half a year?” asked Horikita.

“That’s far too much,” I replied.

“*Sigh*... I suppose that even if I refuse your proposal here, Ayanokouji-kun, I have no guarantee that you’ll continue to devotedly assist me in the future, do I?” asked Horikita.

“Of course not. Because I don’t mind even if I don’t graduate from Class A,” I replied.

“I suppose this is rather fitting for you. What a troublesome proposition,” said Horikita.

“Let me think for a bit,” added Horikita, as she crossed her arms and closed her eyes. It sounded like she would consider the matter and come to a conclusion right here and now, as if she didn’t have any time to delay. Personally, I would’ve been fine waiting until nighttime, but I didn’t want to interrupt her now that she was thinking, so I waited for her answer.

If Horikita, as the center, defeated the general from the opposing class, then our relationship would remain unchanged. Even if Horikita lost, if I then won, she would still get Class Points for the End-of-Year Special Exam. However, the risk was that she’d no longer have my cooperation. If Horikita lost *and* I lost, she would gain my cooperation for the next six months, unless there were some unforeseen problems. Just now, Horikita had been presented with these three possible futures.

“Let’s say that I, who want you to cooperate with me for the next six months, work together with the vanguard and lose on purpose, so that I put you at a disadvantage. What would you do then?” asked Horikita.

“I wouldn’t really care. I’ll keep my word if I lose under any circumstances,” I replied.

“...I see. Well, to be honest, the idea of losing on purpose is totally out of the question for me. All right. I’ve decided,” she said, uncrossing her arms after a few moments of careful consideration. After getting this far in our talk, Horikita seemed to have decided which future she wanted to aim for. “To be honest, I was prepared to take on the role of the general myself. There were no other candidates anyway, and I thought that I should probably fight, as the leader.”

“That makes sense,” I replied.

“But, if you’re willing to serve as the general, then... Well, everything else is trivial. The class winning is my number one priority, more important than my personal wishes. I will take the strategy that

has the best chance of winning,” said Horikita.

“So you’re saying that you’re willing to hand over the position of general?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I will fight with everything I have. It will give me peace of mind, even if it’ll make me more nervous at the same time. Because it means I’ll be forced into an inevitable, hard-fought battle, and that I’ll have to think of a way to win that battle when I’ve given up the position of general.”

For Horikita’s part, she got the insurance and peace of mind that even if she lost, I’d handle it somehow. But, on the other hand, if she used that insurance, she wouldn’t have my cooperation in the future. In that case, the ideal scenario for her would be to lead the way to victory herself while working as the center.

“So then, I formally accept your proposal. I will have you be the general for this upcoming special exam,” said Horikita. Then she added, “You’re sure about this? I’m going to be considering you an asset in this.”

“I don’t intend to drag anyone down, of course. All right. We have a deal,” I replied.

I offered my hand, and Horikita took it, giving it a shake. *I will do whatever it takes to claw out a victory myself.* I’m sure that kind of feeling must have been growing stronger in Horikita, like the feeling of having a fire under you.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me. There’s something I need you to do for me beforehand, if I’ll be accepting this role. I don’t know what the others will think about me being in the general’s seat. There may be classmates who would react negatively to the idea of me being entrusted with such an important battle. There’s also the matter of what happened last year,” I explained.

“I’m sure that not many people will be against the idea. But I guess it’s not impossible,” said Horikita.

“Therefore, I want you to get the consent of the entire class,” I added.

“The entire class?” she asked. “Including Kouenji-kun?”

Her words carried the implied question: *“Is it really necessary to go that far?”*

“Yes. Including Kouenji,” I replied.

“But what if he says no? There’s a good chance that he’ll be temperamental.”

“I don’t think that he’s the type to object to something unless it’s actually detrimental, but I suppose I can’t guarantee that. If he does object, let me know right away. If that happens, I’ll take action directly.”

“You will?” asked Horikita. “Well, that’s fine with me, but... Very well. I’ll begin right away.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. But be as discreet as possible.”

“What do you mean by ‘as discreet as possible’? Oh, and I’ll keep quiet about the part about how your participation here is based on the condition that you won’t be helping the class in the future. You don’t mind, right?”

It was only natural that students wouldn’t look too kindly upon it if they knew that I was participating in order to cut corners in the future. Regarding the terms and conditions, those should be kept between us, after all.

“Not at all, that’s fine. What I mean by discreetly is that I don’t want Ichinose’s class to know that I will be taking on the role of general. In order to increase our chances of winning, even if only slightly, it is essential that we surprise and fluster our opponent. So please make sure that everyone in our class knows not to leak this to anyone outside,” I explained.

“Even if I didn’t do that, I’m sure that there isn’t anyone in our class who would share secrets with another class anyway,” said Horikita.

“Even so. Even if someone doesn’t intend to leak it, there’s a risk that someone could pick up on it through incidental conversations. In that sense, the warning is so that they focus their minds, so to speak,” I replied.

“Yes, that’s true,” said Horikita, honestly accepting what I said. “All right, then, I’ll let you know if I can get the go-ahead from everyone in class or if there are any dissenting opinions. We’re running out of time, so I intended to get that done by this evening.”

I nodded and decided to wait for Horikita’s report.

3.1

HORIKITA AND I went our separate ways at the café shortly after 6 p.m., after which I stopped by the bookstore. I killed time for just under an hour inside the store, and then walked toward the karaoke room where I'd agreed to meet with the guy I was speaking to next, just as planned. On my way there, I spotted Hasebe Haruka in front of me.

Miyake, who was usually together with her, was nowhere to be seen. If we had just run into each other by sheer coincidence, we would have passed by each other in silence. But Haruka's gaze never left me, and there appeared to be a hint of confusion in it. It was easy to tell that there was something she wanted to say.

"Did you need something?" I asked.

When I called out to her as I closed the distance between us, her eyes widened in almost comical surprise. She definitely looked as though she wanted to talk to me, but perhaps she didn't expect that I would come and talk to her.

"Oh, um... Well, it's... I happened to see you talking with Horikita-san earlier, and..." said Hasebe.

Hasebe spoke in a quiet, whispering voice, looking over briefly at the café behind me.

"I, um, just wanted to talk to you for a sec... Am I bothering you?" asked Hasebe.

"No, you're not a bother," I replied. "I don't have a problem with you, Hasebe."

"...Thanks," she replied.

I supposed Hasebe might have thought I had an issue with her thanks to the fact I was calling her by her last name, but that level of distance was good. It would be more problematic for me to go as far as to call her by her given name, Haruka, at this stage.

"Let's move a little ways away from here, though. This place kind of sticks out," I told her.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right...” said Hasebe.

We walked toward the end of the mall, near the wall, so as not to stand out. There was one student who was still somewhat watching me from a distance, but I didn’t think we’d draw too much attention if we talked here.

“We haven’t talked like this since the culture festival,” I remarked.

“Yeah, you’re right... Kiyo—um, I mean, Ayanokouji-kun. Has anything changed for you recently? Wait, that’s a weird question. What am I even saying?” said Hasebe.

I’m sure it wasn’t like there *wasn’t* anything that she wanted to talk about, but maybe it was just that her head was still a mess because we just started this conversation so suddenly. She couldn’t seem to get her words to come out right.

“Nothing’s especially changed, no. For better or worse, things are the same as usual,” I replied.

“I see... Well, um, I feel like I’m getting opportunities to smile a little more these days. Though I honestly don’t know if it’s because I’ve been able to accept what happened with Airi at the culture festival or if it’s simply because enough time has passed.”

No matter how sad past events were, wounds heal, albeit gradually. The more time passed, the more sadness would fade along with the memory. Of course, that wasn’t as easy as one might think. A painful past stays a painful past, and deep scars will remain, of course.

“Um, so hey, later, would you...um...” began Hasebe.

She was speaking in fragments. At that moment, I gently curled the index finger of my right hand two or three times.

“Well, I um... You see...” stammered Hasebe. She was struggling desperately to put words together but wasn’t connecting them well.

“Um... So, later, would you... I mean, together with Miyacchi and Yukimu—”

“Oh ho? A clandestine meeting in a place like this, eh, senpai?”

Just as Hasebe was finally about to say the thing that she wanted to say, a shadow fell over her. It was none other than Amasawa herself who had run over and shown up with such magnificent timing.

“You’ve got Karuizawa-senpai as your girlfriend, and now you’re

going ahead and plotting to make this big titty girl your next one?" asked Amasawa.

I'm sure that Amasawa knew OAA details and more for all of the students, but she seemed to be intentionally playing dumb.

"We're just classmates," I told her.

My own thoughts aside, I'm sure that Amasawa's appearance here wasn't a welcome development for Hasebe either.

"So, hey, I need to talk with my senpai for a minute. Do you mind?" asked Amasawa, in an almost melodic tone.

Amasawa's aggressive, cloying attitude, which seemed to indicate something beyond the level of a casual inquiry, caused Hasebe to distance herself.

"I'll just go... I've got two people waiting for me anyway," said Hasebe.

After responding to Amasawa with a light nod, she turned and quickly walked away.

"Looks like I intruded, huh?" asked Amasawa.

"Oh yeah, incredibly so," I replied.

"That's so mean!" Amasawa said. "And you're the one who called me over, senpai."

I was being a little mean, but she was right. It wasn't a coincidence that Amasawa showed up in the middle of the conversation. Amasawa had spotted me at the same time that I had approached Hasebe, so I signaled her with my finger to come over and join me. It wasn't any surprise that Amasawa had noticed my signal and acted accordingly, without hesitation.

"Did you not want to talk to Hasebe-senpai?" asked Amasawa.

"It's not like that. I just didn't want to spend any more time on something that had no value," I replied.

"That's cold," remarked Amasawa.

Amasawa was free to interpret that however she wanted, and Hasebe was quite free to think whatever she wanted as well.

"Looks like the first-years are busy with their End-of-Year Special Exam, huh?" I observed.

“Yeah, they seem to be kinda panicking and running around like chickens with their heads cut off. As for me, I’m just carefully supervising, pretty much,” said Amasawa, but she quickly amended her statement. “Oh, I didn’t really mean to be an unwanted annoyance today or anything... I just wanted to report on what happened at the training camp, when I attacked Nagumo-senpai but the tables got turned on me unexpectedly.”

I was somewhat concerned about whether or not something had happened, but since there wasn’t any particular mention of any students getting expelled, especially from the first-years, I just ignored it. I had thought that there was still a possibility that she hadn’t made direct contact with Nagumo, but apparently, that wasn’t the case. If so, then it sounded like Amasawa had been planning to withdraw from school during the camp. Ultimately, however, she had decided against it and was here before me.

“I still don’t have my answer yet. But I decided to stay here at school for a while longer with the hope for a better future, rather than taking out my anger on Nagumo-senpai,” Amasawa said. “I think that I’ll probably have more free time on my hands than I know what to do with, so if anything fun happens, please let me join in.”

“In that case, could you do me a favor during your free time?” I asked.

“Huh? Sure, that’s totally fine... What is it?” asked Amasawa.

“I’d like to know more about Nanase Tsubasa,” I replied.

“Hmm? That girl’s your knight, isn’t she, senpai?” she asked. “Don’t you already know plenty about her without having to go through the trouble of investigating? Are you saying she’s a threat?”

“I don’t really think she’s a threat. I just want to know what she’s really after,” I replied.

For the moment, she wasn’t an entity that could be judged so simply as friend or foe.

“If you’re the one asking, then of course I’m all in, senpai. If you want, I can get her expelled,” said Amasawa.

“There’s no need to be that enthusiastic. As long as you gather information appropriately, that’s good,” I told her.

“Okey dokey. Read you loud and clear,” said Amasawa.

There wasn't really any need to ask Amasawa to get information about Nanase, because it wouldn't be difficult to deal with her at any given moment even if I were forced to handle her immediately. However, if carrying out this favor for me could keep Amasawa here at school, then it wasn't a bad move.

"I have an appointment after this, so I'll be seeing you later. Make sure you cooperate with your own class at least somewhat for this End-of-Year Special Exam too," I told her.

"If you're the one asking, senpai, then of course I will," said Amasawa.

Amasawa suddenly gave me an exaggerated salute, and then I started to walk past her.

"...Thank you, senpai," she muttered as we passed by each other, just before she pulled away.

"So she figured it out after all, huh?" I remarked.

It wasn't as though she was getting excellent results in the White Room just for show, of course. It seemed as though she could easily see through me, to my true intentions.

3.2

KARAOKE ROOMS WERE THE go-to choice for students to hold private meetings, as they were the ideal place for it. Following the messages we had already exchanged, I followed the numbers and arrived at the room. When I opened the door, I saw a single student sitting upright with his legs crossed in the silent room, casually moving only his eyes in my direction.

"I see that none of your cronies are with you today," I remarked.

"*Hah*. Now that's unexpected. What, you wanted a little excitement?"

"I just felt like if Ibuki or Ishizaki were here, this oppressive atmosphere would've been a little bit better."

I replied jokingly, but Ryuen only snorted in response.

“That’s quite a thing to say seeing as yer the one who invited me,” he spat.

“Yes,” I conceded. “I suppose you’re probably right.”

“Well, whatever. I was gonna contact you myself anyway, so I forgive you,” said Ryuuen, with a faint chuckle.

“If that’s the case, then I imagine it was about the same topic,” I replied.

“So get on with it,” said Ryuuen, urging me to speak.

“I heard about the wager between you and Sakayanagi,” I told him, still standing in the doorway.

“Oh?” replied Ryuuen.

I’m sure that Ryuuen would have expected that this meeting was about the special exam, but from his reaction, it seemed like he had half expected that this was the first point that we would be touching on.

“I heard that the stakes are that the loser drops out of school. If so, then I may not have the opportunity to see one of you again. I thought I’d at least come see you face-to-face,” I explained.

“If that’s what yer worried ’bout, then go visit Sakayanagi before you can’t see her anymore,” said Ryuuen.

“I intend to, but I’m sure that Sakayanagi will most definitely say something similar,” I replied.

She’d likely say something about how I should meet with Ryuuen before he leaves. As expected, neither side had even entertained the thought that they would lose, not in the slightest.

“Don’t be shy. Sit,” commanded Ryuuen.

We met because we both had something to talk about, but it was sounding like he had already claimed leadership over the meeting.

“I’d prefer not to, if possible. Are you planning to try to splash me with grape juice this time?” I asked.

Ryuuen was sitting across from me, and my eyes were drawn to a suspicious-looking purple glass that was within reach of his right hand. Not only did Ryuuen not seem the type who normally drank that kind of thing, it also appeared to be untouched.

“You’re readin’ way too much into it,” said Ryuuen. “First of all,

knowin' you, you could always avoid it anyway if you wanted. Right?"

"Don't treat me like I have psychic powers. There are lots of situations where I can't avoid things," I replied.

"Such as?" asked Ryuuen.

"Such as... All right, I've got it," I started, looking at the place that Ryuuen urged me to sit, which was near the doorway. "If an employee came in here bringing something, then I wouldn't have any means of escape. If that happened, it'd be impossible for me to avoid it."

And on Ryuuen's end, if he tried to splash me in that situation, he would try to cover a wide area.

"You sound rather suspicious of me," said Ryuuen.

"That said, you don't sound too amused by the idea," I replied.

Well, in that case, I guess I'll just do as he says and have a seat, I thought to myself. It was incredibly surreal, but we two men were facing each other in this spacious karaoke room.

"You've taken the plunge on a major gamble. If the next special exam had been focused on academic ability, it would be almost 100 percent certain that you would lose. Even if you were to take some risks and make dodgy deals behind the scenes, Sakayanagi would have likely thoroughly prevented you from doing so, unlike the good-natured Ichinose," I told him.

"It's the one do-or-die game in a year. It'll definitely be a game that even folks who can't use their brains'll have at least a chance of winnin'. If the school was so completely lackin' in entertainment, I'd be beggin' to get kicked out, rather," said Ryuuen, punctuating his words with a laugh, but judging from the way he looked, he didn't seem to think it was really an all-or-nothing situation.

Horikita Manabu's generation, which already graduated, Nagumo's generation, and ours. If we looked at the trends for past end-of-year special exams, we could see that it wasn't just academic ability that was required. I figured that Ryuuen was convinced that the school would choose exam content that would give even his class a fighting chance.

"Are you preparing for the special exam?" I asked. "I thought I'd at least make sure that you're not trying to engage in some idiotic

underhanded scheme, like what you did to Ichinose's class in the past."

For the End-of-Year Special Exam, we would be penalized based on the number of students absent on the day of the exam. With that in mind, there was a nonzero chance he'd find a method to weaken his opponent in advance.

"I'm guessing you remember what you said to me that one time. You said I had to 'grow more and get better.' Somethin' like that," said Ryuuen.

"I'm tempted to respond to that with something like 'because it was true'," I replied.

He snickered at my unreserved statement, and then Ryuuen's gaze became even sharper.

"I'm gonna show you and Sakayanagi my serious side. May not be fittin' for me, but I'm gonna win fair and square," declared Ryuuen.

"As proclamations go, that was splendid. Although, if that was a bluff, you're saying it to the wrong person. Also, even if you've promised fairness, I don't trust what you've said at all. Nor will I convey what you've said here to Sakayanagi," I replied, asserting that this wasn't going to serve as an opening move for him to get his opponent to drop her guard.

"Yeah, figured as much. Which is exactly why it makes sense," said Ryuuen.

"I see. So if we turn that around, you mean it gives credibility to your statement that you'll be putting up a fair fight, then?" I asked.

It seemed like you could say this was a good example of how things could change depending on the angle from which you look at them.

"I don't really need to tell anyone else, as long as you know it," said Ryuuen.

"If that's what you mean, I understand," I answered. Ryuuen was free to decide whether or not to engage in underhanded dealings in the shadows, of course, but the statement he just made would determine how I would view and evaluate him in the future.

"It doesn't seem like you're feeling any pressure or anxiety."

Ryuuen responded with a light wave of his hand, gesturing, "As if.

There's no way I would be."

"In that case, I'll let you show me. Show me what happens when you go head-to-head against Sakayanagi," I announced.

I got up from my seat and turned my back on Ryuen.

"Ayanokouji, aren't ya gonna be a representative in the exam?" asked Ryuen.

"Is that what you're wondering about? What I do this time doesn't matter to you," I replied.

"Your opponent's only Ichinose, sure. Normally, ya wouldn't need to go out of your way to do anythin'. But that woman's gettin' the stench of a beast on her now. It's growin' more pungent. She might bite and tear Horikita to shreds, chomp her bones and all," said Ryuen.

He didn't sound like he was joking, so perhaps something had happened somewhere, sometime, to make him sincerely believe that.

"The fact is, it's not my class's policy at the moment for me to take to the stage," I replied.

When I said that, Ryuen snorted lightly. "Well, whatever. It's more convenient for me if your class loses anyway."

Fortunately, it didn't seem like he was going to try to splash me with the juice after all, which was a relief.

3.3

AFTER LEAVING THE KARAOKE ROOM where I met Ryuen, I stopped to take a breather outside the building. *It's getting pretty late. It's probably time for me to head back.* With that thought, I decided to stop by one more place. The probability of running into someone at this time of day wasn't high, but there were a few other people I wanted to meet aside from the leaders of each class. I headed for a place where I often saw one of them.

She would come all the way to the rest area on the second floor. I suppose I should say that she didn't betray my expectations, or something along those lines, because the person I was looking for was

indeed there. I stood in front of one of the several vending machines that were lined up, making a show of choosing a product, while looking at the sample bottles and cans lined up.

“So, how have things been with Sakayanagi since then?” I asked, muttering as though I was just talking to myself.

After a short pause, a quiet reply came in response.

“...Hello. I’ve had more opportunities to talk with her since then.”

“That’s good. You still like this place even though your relationship has improved, huh?” I remarked.

“It’s calming. Besides, I’m still not, well, good at dealing with people, after all.”

I continued to stand in the same position, listening to the words coming from the gap between the vending machines.

“Time alone is important too,” I remarked. “I understand that very well.”

You could feel like you had trouble catching your breath when you were always surrounded by lots of people, after all.

“Is this a coincidence...?” asked Yamamura. “You coming here?”

“I came by thinking it would be nice if you were here, Yamamura. Actually, to tell you the truth, there is one thing I’d like to know,” I replied.

“Something...you’d like to know?” she asked.

Just to be safe, I carefully reaffirmed that no one else was around, and then I told her what it was that I wanted to know from her. After I finished, Yamamura was silent for a brief moment, as though she were reflecting upon the meaning of my question.

“Why...did you come to me to ask...?” asked Yamamura.

“Because I thought that you would know the most about what’s going on in that regard, Yamamura. Or am I mistaken in that assessment?” I asked.

“...Well, I... I’m not sure what to say,” said Yamamura.

If she didn’t know the answer that I was looking for, then she could’ve just said so. However, she avoided making a clear statement, as if she were trying to dodge the question. Which had to mean that she

did have some kind of answer.

“I already have a few people in mind. But I want something to help me narrow it down,” I added.

“Well, that’s... Wouldn’t this be a good question for Sakayanagisan? Or perhaps—”

“I’m not sure about that. As far as *this matter* is concerned, it has nothing to do with Sakayanagi as of right now. I do not plan to do anything that will cause trouble for Class A. I hope that you can see this as nothing more than a third-party problem,” I explained, cutting her off.

After a moment of silence, Yamamura slowly emerged from the shadows of the vending machines.

“I don’t know if it’ll be useful to you, but I do have a little bit of information that might help you with your question,” said Yamamura.

Though there was the possibility that Yamamura wouldn’t give me any information, she pulled out her phone. She then turned the screen toward me and began playing a video. However, because of the distance between her and the people that she was filming, she hadn’t been able to pick up any audio from them.

“During my investigations, the only one I’ve looked into who fits that description right now is this person, Ayanokouji-kun. I don’t know what the conversation that they’re having in the video is about, since I was too far away, but... What do you think? I’m sorry if this is completely irrelevant,” said Yamamura.

The date and time was December 26, 7 p.m. The place was Keyaki Mall. The two people shown in the video were engaged in conversation, at a close distance.

“...Is this not useful?” asked Yamamura.

“On the contrary, it’s plenty useful. As expected of you, Yamamura. Splendid work,” I replied.

“Oh no, no, it’s really no big deal... I just so happened to be there is all...” she answered.

She was being humble. The person on her screen was very wary of their surroundings. The fact that Yamamura was able to capture this much footage in such a situation was quite impressive. I wouldn’t be surprised if she even had information that I didn’t. However, this video

alone didn't seem to be enough to tell me the entire story. There was at least one more piece of information I wanted to have before I could arrive at a conclusion.

"I am incredibly grateful for the information and will be putting it to effective use. And I will not say anything about where I got it, of course, Yamamura," I told her.

"I just hope that I can be of help."

Even though she was the one who had given me useful information, Yamamura bowed her head to me, somewhat apologetically. After we parted ways, I immediately decided who to contact based on the information she'd given me, and made up my mind to reach out to that person while getting more information from Kei.

3.4

I WAITED FOR MY CLASSMATE to arrive at a certain location within Keyaki Mall. About fifteen minutes after Kei had contacted her, she suddenly appeared from around the corner.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Ayanokouji-kun," Matsushita called out to me, seeming a little puzzled by this turn of events. "I got a call from Karuizawa-san... She said that you wanted to talk to me?"

"Sorry about this. Will it be okay with your friends, though?" I asked.

"Yeah. I told them I'd be away for about thirty minutes. That should be enough time, right?" asked Matsushita.

"Plenty," I replied.

"So then...what did you want to talk about?" asked Matsushita.

It was a normal reaction to be wary if someone went through all the trouble of wanting to talk to you alone, just the two of you. Matsushita's facial expression was the same as ever, but inside, she was probably feeling uneasy.

"Do you know why we're meeting in this place?" I asked.

"What do you mean? Are you saying there's some other reason

besides me being here in Keyaki Mall?" she asked.

It was certainly true that I knew immediately that Matsushita was at Keyaki Mall, since I'd heard so from Kei. So it was normal for her to think that I was waiting for her in the same mall.

"You were following me last year. We stopped around here and talked," I told her.

"Oh... Now that you mention it, yes, I think you're right. Yes, this is the place," said Matsushita.

She looked around again, and then at the pillars, and then seemed to remember the place where she had been hiding then. At the time, she had questioned me about the incident with the acting director and my ability to do mental arithmetic.

"That day, you said something to me. You said that you wanted to know what my true abilities are," I said.

"Yeah." Matsushita said. "I remember you being kind of evasive about it, though."

"Nearly a year has passed since then. Have you found the answer to that?"

"I'm not sure. You've contributed more to the class compared to when we were first-years, but...I still get the feeling that you're not being serious, after all."

"I see." Unlike mere superficial evaluations, Matsushita had a reasonably good eye for discerning individual ability, more so than my other classmates.

"If you're willing to work with me, Matsushita, then I might be able to show you a little more of my true ability," I told her.

"...What do you mean by that?" she asked.

Now that I'd caught Matsushita's interest, I proceeded to discuss the information I'd recently obtained from Yamamura, and what it would mean moving forward. She seemed unable to hide her surprise after she finished listening to what I had to say.

"It's true that such a thing happened, but... It's a while after the fact. Who told you about it?" asked Matsushita. She could have simply been reminiscing, but her expression told me otherwise.

"It's a conversation that happened nearly three months ago, but

was there something about it that still sticks out to you?" I asked.

"...Well... Yeah, I suppose so," said Matsushita.

While she admitted that part, it seemed like Matsushita couldn't help but be curious about where I had gotten my information.

"Sorry, but I can't reveal my source. I'll just say that it's not a classmate," I told her.

I could tell her that much, since there wouldn't be anything to gain in the future from doubting my classmates for no reason.

"So you want to know something about *that*, then. I just hope that I remember the details of it," said Matsushita.

"There's no need for an in-depth account of the conversation. I've got a good idea of that," I replied.

When I gave her the names of everyone involved, even Matsushita, who had been trying to maintain her usual attitude, started to stumble over her words.

"Oh, um... Err, yes. That's certainly everyone. But then, what is it that you want to ask me?" asked Matsushita.

"Knowing you, I thought that you might have caught something in that discussion," I replied.

I had called Matsushita for two reasons. One was for final confirmation that what I'd learned from Yamamura was correct. I had determined that there wasn't any problem with that information, as the names of the classmates matched. The other reason was to test to see whether Matsushita could be seen as a student worthy of evaluation. Matsushita, having quietly figured out the reasons for her being summoned, sighed and muttered something under her breath.

"It feels like I'm being evaluated," said Matsushita.

"Who can say?" I replied.

The hard look on her face melted away, and Matsushita smiled warmly.

"I'm going to answer you seriously because I think you're testing me. I remember it well. There definitely were things that stuck out to me. The things we were discussing, the members present—there was this feeling that something was off about everything," she said.

Then, while digging up those memories, Matsushita began to tell

me her own version of events. I listened to her speak, but once I was sure of the consistency of her story with the facts, I interrupted her.

“That’s enough,” I told her.

“...You said that you’ll show me your true abilities, but what do you plan to do?” she asked.

“If I get a turn in the upcoming special exam, I intend to show you the results of what you wish,” I answered.

“I see. If I can get Ayanokouji-kun’s seal of approval, then I suppose I can rest easy about this upcoming special exam.”

“I can’t do it alone from here on out though. The entire class needs to grow.”

“I understand. But if our class could unite as one someday, then we probably won’t lose to anyone.” She said that part with a smile, but she was also keeping today’s events firmly in mind. “Anyway, I’ll pretend that our conversation today never happened. Contact me anytime.”

It was a small thing, but the fact that she was able to make such considerations on her own was an important factor.

3.5

THAT NIGHT, after ten o’clock, I heard a light knock at my door, which I immediately opened to greet my visitor. It was none other than Class 2-A’s Hashimoto, unconcerned with his surroundings and dressed casually.

“Did anyone see you?” I asked.

“I had to check out what was going on, so that ate up a lot of time. I took the proper steps as I moved around, just in case,” said Hashimoto.

“If so, then good. I’m sure that no one would be welcoming of the idea of you and I meeting at this time,” I replied.

“If you have business with me, couldn’t you have just called? Or at least put more thought into the location,” said Hashimoto as he

turned his gaze toward me, like he was probing me. That was probably the unconscious behavior of a person who was always suspicious of others.

“There are some things that you can’t talk about over the phone. Besides, meeting outside carries its own risks,” I replied.

“Well, okay. So? What did you wanna talk about?” asked Hashimoto.

I wasn’t going to make him stand there and listen to me talk, so I invited him inside and made space for him to sit.

“I thought we should talk, now that the End-of-Year Special Exam has been announced. I just wanted to ask again where you stand on it,” I asked him.

“The school didn’t disclose what the rules are though exactly, right? I don’t know what I’m going to do yet,” said Hashimoto.

“I didn’t ask about what you were going to do, I asked where you stand. You said before that you were going to be on Ryuuen’s side,” I answered, thinking back to just the other day when Hashimoto was talking to me, here in this very room.

“Nothing’s changed,” he said. “The only way for me to survive is to let Ryuuen win. Though, I can’t say that things are going well. I was planning to assist Ryuuen once the exam was announced, but I never imagined that the school wouldn’t even tell us the rules.”

It was certainly true that, depending on the exam rules, it was possible for him to have lent a hand during the preliminary preparations stage.

“If you’re going to betray your class, you should actually be considering this to be convenient,” I told him.

“Huh?” he blinked. Hashimoto was vocally lamenting this turn of events, but that was based on the assumption that his betrayal wasn’t going to be discovered.

“If the contents of the exam had been disclosed to us, then Sakayanagi would have used that to devise a strategy to trap you and Ryuuen. However, as long as we don’t know the contents, she can’t produce any countermeasures in advance. The most she can do is not select you as a representative. She can’t predict what you’ll do in the actual exam,” I explained.

For Sakayanagi, the progression of the special exam was actually starting from a negative.

“I see. That’s one way of thinking about it,” said Hashimoto as he nodded, deeply interested. But he didn’t seem like he was going to be putting his confidence in that line of thinking at all. Rather, he seemed restless, as though the main issue lay elsewhere. “I think it’s ’bout time you gave me your answer, Ayanokouji. I’ve been waitin’ for a long time, y’know?”

“About whether I’m willing to transfer to Ryuen’s class, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. I decided to take a substantial risk and betray Sakayanagi. That’s because the class you put yourself in and stay in will determine my future path too,” said Hashimoto.

As usual, Hashimoto responded with a mixture of truth and lies. If Ryuen emerged victorious from the End-of-Year Special Exam, the first part of Hashimoto’s plan would be on track. Then, if I decided to transfer classes afterward, he would achieve his goal.

“What if I say that I won’t go?” I asked him.

“Well, that’d be a problem. Because there’d be no avoiding the fact that my chances of graduating from Class A would fall,” said Hashimoto.

“I deliberately didn’t ask about this before, but what about the Private Points? It’s not exactly like Ryuen’s class has a fortune. It would take a lot of money for them to get both you and me, Hashimoto,” I replied with what I thought was an obvious question, but it only prompted a thin smile on Hashimoto’s lips.

“Well, that’s not quite true. See, I hear Ryuen’s been makin’ deals with first-years and third-years, and he’s been rakin’ in quite a lot of Private Points,” said Hashimoto.

“Making deals?” I asked.

“I don’t know the exact details, but if he’s collecting from other grades, then it wouldn’t be unrealistic for him to have enough to cover transfers for two people, would it?” asked Hashimoto.

If that were true, then yes, it might be realistic to achieve. But I was skeptical as to how much of this I should believe.

“Well, even if we are a little short on points, there’s no need for

you to worry, since the other day we got more Private Points than we expected from Nagumo. That was a huge help,” said Hashimoto.

He meant the reward promised to me by Nagumo, with whom I had made a bet at the camp. I received 3,000,000 points from that. He had given me way, way more Private Points than I had even imagined, so I was honestly shocked. I had given Hashimoto 600,000 points, 20 percent of the take, as requested, since he had taken the initiative to do the work during the camp. As for the remaining 2,400,000 points, I divided that up equally among the remaining fifteen members of our group, giving out 160,000 points to each person. As for the 20,000,000 points required for a transfer, that amount could cover a mere 3 percent of that, if at all. Nevertheless, 3 percent was more than 0 percent.

“You’re the leading man, you should’ve kept a million or one point five mil for yourself. I would have been more than okay with letting you keep that much of it. Agreeing to the same share as the rest of the group is way too saintly of you,” said Hashimoto exasperatedly as he recalled what happened at the time of the camp.

Indeed, Private Points certainly carried a role that was near omnipotent at this school. Even so, I for one wasn’t going to be clinging to Private Points alone. When I didn’t say anything in response to that, Hashimoto quietly muttered, “Well, I guess the fact that you’re not so easily influenced by money is one of your good points.”

“Anyway, I plan on laying low and keeping quiet for the weekend, but d’ya have any advice for the exam?” asked Hashimoto.

There wasn’t much that I could say to Hashimoto now. In fact, I didn’t even feel the need to say anything. It was just that...

“Wow, okay, rather than advice, I’m gettin’ silence... Okay,” huffed Hashimoto.

I had no intention whatsoever of interfering in the confrontation between Sakayanagi and Ryuen on my own initiative, so the correct answer was to leave things be and keep a careful watch. However, it wasn’t a bad idea to be prepared to at least be able to deal with the situation in a flexible manner, as the situation arose.

“I was thinking a little,” I replied.

“Okay? So can I take that to mean that you’ve come up with some advice?” asked Hashimoto.

It sounded like he was looking for my opinion, without expecting too much.

“Hashimoto, if you continue as you are, in these circumstances, that is, if you enter this special exam without a new strategy, you may end up falling into a dead end,” I told him.

“Whoa, whoa, I asked you for *advice*, didn’t I, my dude? Come on, enough with the scary stuff. Sure, I might end up in a pinch, but I can handle myself,” he said.

“By weaving lies into things, as usual?” I asked in return.

“Lies are a powerful weapon, y’know.”

I knew that. Sometimes, a lie could be even more powerful than physical violence. I even once told Horikita that, a long time ago.

“Yes, it’s true that lies are powerful. It’s even easy to ruin someone with lies. But it’s also true that lies won’t work on everyone,” I explained.

“...You’re saying they won’t work against my opponent this time?” said Hashimoto.

“They won’t, no,” I replied.

Sakayanagi was extremely wary of lies and had keen sensitivity. No matter how skillfully Hashimoto manipulated his words, his battles were built on lies. Having said that, Sakayanagi’s trust in Hashimoto, who had betrayed her, was as low as it can get—down to the ground. At present, she probably wouldn’t even listen to him.

“Well, even so, I don’t have any other choice but to do it. It’s how I’ve been fightin’ all my life,” replied Hashimoto, as though that were the only weapon that he could boast. Actually, no, I supposed it was just that he didn’t know of any other way to fight. “You’ll think about it though, won’t ya? About you and me transferring to Ryuen’s class together.”

“You’re going to be on Ryuen’s side. You’re not going to change your mind about that?” I asked.

“Nope,” said Hashimoto.

“Then, what if Ryuen finds himself in a tight spot, what then? What if it’s confirmed for certain that he can’t win, whether you’re on his side or not? Will you double cross again and go back to Sakayanagi

when that time comes?” I asked.

“That’s—”

“If you change your position based on how the fight is going, then you’ll be nothing but disgraceful in the eyes of the people around you,” I told him.

“...Then what am I supposed to do? I’m gonna be on Ryuuken’s side. I’m gonna, but...I don’t wanna think about it, but if I do get in a jam like that, what choice do I have? All I could do is get down on my knees or do whatever I can and ask Sakayanagi for forgiveness,” said Hashimoto.

Even while preparing himself for the worst and accepting his fate, at the very last moment, he would search for a means of escape. It was just the same Hashimoto Masayoshi that I’d analyzed thus far.

“Then, at the very least, don’t lie to yourself. That’s the least you can do,” I told him.

I watched Hashimoto’s back until the door closed behind him and he disappeared beyond the entranceway. It would depend on the rules of this special exam, but if Hashimoto wasn’t careful, this might be the last time that I would see him. That thought on my mind, I decided to get ready for bed.

3.6

IT WAS SUNDAY MORNING. When I had arrived at my destination ten minutes before the appointed time, I saw that the person I was going to meet was already waiting for me, sitting on a bench.

“Morning.”

When I called out to her, her beautiful side profile turned toward me, and she gave me a lovely smile.

“Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun. Are you sure this is all right? For you to call out to me in a place like this?” asked Ichinose.

“What do you mean?” I asked in return.

“Well, there are people coming and going. Won’t people get the

wrong idea if someone in the area were to see us? Someone like Karuizawa-san?" she asked.

"Don't worry, I've already told Kei about today. A mysterious secret or a bad lie would only be a hindrance in maintaining a relationship," I replied.

"Yeah, lying would probably be a bad idea," she responded affirmatively before continuing on to ask, "Ayanokouji-kun, what...are you planning to do about the special exam?"

Perhaps she was hoping to learn which side I would be on during the exam, how I'd be taking part in it.

"I currently have no plans to take part in the special exam as a representative," I told her.

I decided to answer just like that. I told her a lie right after telling her how lies would be a hindrance on a relationship. Unfortunately, it wasn't even a lie that was necessary in order to deceive Ichinose's class, as I had told Horikita. The reason I told this lie was because the strategy that I had relayed to Horikita was itself a lie, and it wasn't important.

"I see. Well, I guess that's good news for us, then," said Ichinose.

Ichinose accepted what I said without question, and seemed somewhat relieved. From her behavior, she didn't appear to distrust me in any way. I could take this to mean that she almost certainly did not know that I would be enlisted as a representative in this exam.

"That's the way things are for now, anyway. There's a chance that Horikita might request that I join as a representative. If that happens, please go easy on me," I told her.

"I should be the one asking you that! Because, if at all possible, I don't want to fight you, Ayanokouji-kun," said Ichinose. Then, almost immediately, she amended her previous statement. "I don't want to fight, but I don't have much choice. It's inevitable that our classes are going to face off against each other." After saying that, Ichinose immediately attempted to steer us away from the topic, saying, "I don't think we should talk about the End-of-Year Special Exam anymore."

"Because we're going to be facing off against each other directly after all. It's best not to discuss either the good or the bad in depth," I replied, since it sounded like she didn't want to engage in awkwardly sniffing around each other for information.

“Yes, I agree.”

“The reason I called you here today, Ichinose, is because our promised time is drawing close. You remember that?”

“There’s no way I could forget. You mean about what we talked about in your room last year, right, Ayanokouji-kun?” said Ichinose.

I nodded, and then Ichinose nodded in return.

“I want to meet just like we are now, one year from today.”

“Just the two of us. You and me, Ichinose.”

“Don’t get trapped by hesitation this coming year. Meet with me again. Can you promise me that?”

All of that was what I had told Ichinose last year.

“If we both make it through this special exam without getting expelled, when we get there, make time for it,” I told her.

What words would we hear then? Ichinose probably had no idea either. With a mixture of anticipation and anxiety, she answered me clearly.

“Definitely,” said Ichinose.

I nodded and stood up, lifting myself up off the bench. We hadn’t spoken for very long at all, but in light of tomorrow, that was probably okay.

“Now I’m going to pop in to the gym for a minute. What about you, Ichinose?” I asked.

“I have plans to meet with my classmates today, so I’ll stop by there another time,” she replied.

Yeah, that made sense—with the End-of-Year Special Exam just around the corner, it wasn’t time to be working up a sweat in the gym. It sounded like she was meeting up with friends, like she said. Ichinose, still sitting down on the bench, saw me off, and then I decided to head on over to Keyaki Mall. With this meeting, that made three people. Now all I had to do was talk to Sakayanagi, and all of the things I had to do would be finished.

AFTER PARTING WAYS with Ichinose, I spent an hour in the gym working up a sweat. Once I was done, I noticed a single student standing near the entrance to the gym. This didn't seem like a mere chance encounter.

"How unusual to see you in a place like this, Kanzaki," I remarked.

"...Yeah," he gave a brief response and then casually looked between myself and the gym.

"If you want to join the gym, I can give you an introduction," I offered.

"No, that's not why I'm here. I heard that you went to the gym, and I was waiting for you."

In that case, it seemed likely that his information came from Ichinose.

"Is this about something that is talked about in person, face to face, and not over the phone?" I asked.

"It's not enough to warrant a conversation. I happened to hear that you have no plans at present to appear as a representative. I just wanted to confirm whether or not that was true," he said.

"It depends on Horikita's plans, but as of right now, I don't plan to, no," I replied.

Despite getting the same answer I'd given in my previous statement, Kanzaki's facial expression turned somewhat stern.

"Is that true?" he asked.

"I thought I already answered your question, but you don't seem to believe me," I replied.

"We are in direct competition with each other this time, of course," he said. "It is not necessary for you to tell me the entire truth in this conversation, and it's not for us to decide whether you do or do not appear as a representative. It's just that... Ichinose wants to believe what you've said. Or rather, I should say she does believe you."

While I could interpret what he said as a reserved, modest statement, it also showed some bullishness. It sounded like Ichinose was the source of his information after all. I didn't pay any mind to that

part, and just let it slide.

“I would like to believe you as well, but...” began Kanzaki.

Still, Kanzaki tried to ascertain the credibility of my statements. I told him already that there wasn't any deep meaning to what I was saying here, but he was insistent.

“Perhaps there's some reason you don't believe what I'm saying? It sounds like you're questioning me because you have some kind of basis for thinking I might be a representative,” I replied.

“...Well, no, I...” Kanzaki began to deny it, but then he stopped to think, and then restated his position.

“It's just hearsay. I've heard through the grapevine that you had agreed to being a representative early on. Moreover, you were given the position of general, rather than vanguard or center, for this exam. That's what the rumor says,” explained Kanzaki.

If it were merely the fact I was chosen as a representative, I could dismiss it as plain old gossip. However, Kanzaki had included the important keyword “general” in conveying this to me. Even if Horikita was widely recognized as the leader of the class, she had given up that position. Considering that this fact was included, it seemed like this couldn't be dismissed as just hearsay. Judging from the look of uncomfortable embarrassment on Kanzaki's face, he probably didn't intend to tell me something so pointed when he'd started this conversation.

However, my quick denial of representative status must have strengthened his desire for the truth. Information that I had warned Horikita to keep confidential appeared to have been leaked, and rather easily at that.

“That's an extremely specific rumor,” I replied. “But it's just that. And rumors are just rumors. There hasn't been any such talk as of yet.”

While I was certain of what had happened, I continued to deny it. Even if denying it here and now was a lie, Kanzaki would simply have to understand that it was a permissible lie, necessary as part of making a strategy.

“...I understand. If you say so, then I'm sure it must simply be a rumor. However, if Horikita does ask that you participate as a representative, would you...please decline, if at all possible?” asked

Kanzaki.

“That’s quite a drastic request to make,” I replied.

“I understand quite well what you are truly capable of. If you do appear as a representative, our class will inevitably have a difficult battle. More importantly though, there’s also the fear that Ichinose will not be able to show her true potential if she has to fight you too,” said Kanzaki.

So he was saying that he didn’t want me to be a representative, and I could tell that he was speaking honestly about that point, at least.

“I understand what you’re trying to say,” I said. “But that’s not an ask I can easily accept. If Horikita makes a request like that, it’s only natural for me to consider it, as her classmate.”

I could feel the strength in Kanzaki’s straightened arms.

“My apologies. I just asked you something that no one should accept. Please forget it,” said Kanzaki.

“It’s all right. It just shows how much you’re staking on this upcoming special exam,” I replied.

There haven’t been many times where I’ve so plainly insinuated that I would be taking to the stage like this before. I could completely understand his wariness.

“That was all I came to discuss with you today, Ayanokouji. I apologize for prying into your business so persistently. I am also grateful for all that you have done for us,” said Kanzaki.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s only natural that we’re each trying our very best in our quest to reach Class A,” I said.

Regardless of whether his approach and direction were correct or not, Kanzaki was thinking through things in his own way and trying to find a means of survival for his class’s sake. I had no intention whatsoever of denying that. If anything, I found him interesting to observe. If Ichinose hadn’t gone through a chemical change, I would’ve liked to have done a little more work revising him, but it wasn’t too late to see what kind of results he could achieve in the End-of-Year Special Exam. After seeing Kanzaki go, trying to hide his discouragement as he walked away, I decided to head back to the dormitory myself.

3.8

IT WAS JUST BEFORE ten o'clock at night, and Sunday would soon be over. Since I wanted to be considerate to Sakayanagi, who had told me that her schedule was full, it was decided that I would be communicating with just one of the people I wanted to meet in a particular way. I received a call from Sakayanagi on my phone. I turned off the TV and pressed the button to accept the call.

"I am terribly sorry to be calling you at such a late hour. Is this time still acceptable?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Yeah, it's fine," I told her.

"You said that you wished to speak with me?"

I would have thought that she would've had an idea of what this was about, but she asked me that question as though she didn't know.

"I'll be frank. I heard that you agreed to the terms of Ryuuen's bet, that the loser will drop out of school," I told her.

"Oh, is that what this is about? Well, I suppose that it was only a matter of time before news of our wager reached your ears, Ayanokouji-kun, but who told you about it? Actually, no, I suppose it would be uncouth of me to ask about that."

Sakayanagi made a show of pursuing the source of my information and then withdrawing.

"Considering Class A's position and the fact that you have a Protect Point, the terms of your bet are quite extraordinary," I remarked.

"Yes, I suppose that may be true, if you are only looking at the terms. However, I will not be defeated by him, and Ryuuen-kun's actions amount to nothing more than wringing his own neck," said Sakayanagi.

No matter how disproportionate the conditions were, so long as she didn't lose, there wasn't any problem. That was her stance. Though her position was different from Ryuuen's, they were the same in the end.

"You aren't calling because you are worried about me. Are you?"

asked Sakayanagi.

“Do I need to be worried?” I asked.

“Heavens, no. I would simply like for you to see how the battle ends. That should be enough, I think.” She chuckled softly on the other end of the line. Immediately afterwards, I could just barely hear a small yawn.

“Is it already your bedtime?” I asked.

“No, I just had things to do early this morning,” she replied.

“Should I let you go, then?”

“Please do not say such a sad thing. I am fully prepared in anticipation of drowsiness.”

“Fully prepared?” I asked.

“I have taken a bath, brushed my teeth, and even changed into my pajamas. I am already lying down, so I can sleep as soon as our call is finished,” explained Sakayanagi.

Apparently, on the other end of the call, Sakayanagi had finished getting ready for bed and was under the covers.

“Well, you certainly do seem fully prepared,” I replied.

“Yes. Which is why I would welcome even a long chat,” said Sakayanagi, as though my words were a replacement for a lullaby. “Apparently you have also met with Ryuuen-kun and Ichinose-san.”

“I didn’t notice Yamamura following me at all, though... Impressive, as always,” I replied.

“No matter what you say, Ayanokouji-kun, it is rather difficult to perfectly escape from the gazes of many other people, including those from other grade levels and adults.”

So she had connections not just with students, but with some adults as well. Of course, I had to take what she said with a grain of salt. Even so, it was a big deal, since the information she was getting seemed correct.

“Incidentally, Ayanokouji-kun, will you be participating in this special exam as a representative?” asked Sakayanagi.

“I can’t give an answer from my own mouth. Any reports from your regular source?” I asked.

“We aren’t keeping a watch on your class or Ichinose-san’s class this time, as we are not in direct confrontation with you.”

Which meant that she was interested, but she wasn’t going as far as to monitor us. But if Sakayanagi knew already, then this wouldn’t be information I would need to go through the trouble of hiding from her. As I thought, it sounded like the information was leaked only to Ichinose’s side, and not to Sakayanagi’s side.

“Anyway, it feels like Ryuuken’s getting ready for war, but you seem the same as always,” I remarked.

I had been trying to compliment her for keeping her cool, but her response was surprising.

“I have to wonder about that. Whether I am the same as always,” said Sakayanagi.

“What’s different?” I asked.

“I decided to try something new these past two days. This new endeavor involved arranging an opportunity to meet and talk with my classmates individually. I am sure this is an action that I would not have taken in the past, as the old me,” said Sakayanagi.

Basically, the image Sakayanagi projected was of someone who only kept close associates—such as Kamuro, Hashimoto, and Kitou—by her side. It could be said that this was typical of Sakayanagi, who fundamentally didn’t trust people. She shared this tendency with Ryuuken.

“Why did you want to talk to the people in your class? You didn’t disclose anything specific or discuss countermeasures for the special exam with a large group of people, did you?” I asked.

“That’s correct, I did not. It had nothing to do with the exam. That is precisely why... Yes, I suppose you could say that’s the problem,” said Sakayanagi. She was silent for a moment as she mentally sorted out the reasons behind her past actions, and translated them into words. “I should have gotten to know Masumi-san better. I want to know more about Yamamura-san. Such unnecessary feelings, yet I think that they must have been what had driven me,” said Sakayanagi.

It was no use crying over spilt milk, as they say. Kamuro had already been expelled from the school, so she couldn’t talk to him even if she wanted to. As for Yamamura, who was in her same class, their

relationship had previously been a one-way street, with Yamamura being the only one interested. But now that they had taken their first step as friends, as opposed to how they were before, Sakayanagi was trying to deepen their relationship so that she wouldn't have any regrets this time.

Even with her other classmates, Sakayanagi's relationship with them could change in any way and at any time, but she didn't know if they might disappear. It was those kinds of thoughts that made her want to know more about the allies that she had now; that seemed the gist of it. There was a chance that Sakayanagi herself was puzzled by it.

"To be perfectly honest, I do not think this sentiment is efficient. One could even say that I am engaging in unproductive actions. And yet, I decided that I must. That isn't like me, is it?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Yeah. It's really not like you at all," I replied.

Despite her soft facial expressions, Sakayanagi had been making ruthless, cold, mechanical judgments, trusting in her own logic. The incident with Kamuro and Yamamura before must have had a major impact on her if she had begun to change like this.

"It's because of you, Ayanokouji-kun. You have changed me," she said.

"I don't think everything about you has changed. But I have to admit that at least one part has," I replied.

"...Why did you act as a mediator between Yamamura-san and me, to bring us together?"

Her question sounded to me like she was saying, "If you hadn't done that, I could still be myself."

"Yamamura had unexpectedly suffered quite a blow because of me. So I just made it up to her in a way that was easy to understand. I can't give you any further explanation than that," I replied.

Yamamura was a secret spy, using her lack of presence to act as Sakayanagi's right hand. It was only natural that I should assume responsibility for having gotten in the way of that, but it would also be pointless for me to go on and on about it to Sakayanagi right now.

"I see. I had thought for a moment there that you may have merely been doing it out of the goodness of your heart, Ayanokouji-kun, but it appears that I was wrong. You had a definite reason for it after

all,” said Sakayanagi.

“Actually, wait, I’d much prefer if you could just interpret it as kindness on my part. Can I take back what I said before?” I replied.

“Heh heh. I am afraid that’s impossible.”

Sakayanagi’s voice from the phone speaker was sounding sleepier and sleepier. Up until this point, she had sounded calm and composed as usual, so I figured now would be a good time for me to hang up, but...

“You did something uncalled for,” she said.

“You are entirely prejudiced against this change in you, but it can’t be all bad, can it? If it was something truly uncalled for, you could have just forced yourself to suppress these new feelings. Right?” I replied.

“Yes... I suppose...you might be right.”

Sakayanagi did not trust others and continued to use them. In a certain way, she was like me, completely fixated on her own way of thinking. But she was starting to accept that she was changing.

“You should face them, a lot of them, all those you haven’t faced up until now. By doing so, you should be able to see an unexpected side of yourself that you never knew about before,” I told her.

Through that, Sakayanagi should surely be able to find new options as well. Whether that would become a strength or be a weakness remained to be seen, though.

“That is why Karuizawa-san and Ichinose-san have come to love you. You rudely barge into people’s hearts, trampling in without hesitation, ravage them without permission, and then you make them sprout and grow. But you are stubborn in nature, even more so than me, and you do not change easily. Heh heh, but that’s what makes you so attractive,” said Sakayanagi.

“I’ll take that as a compliment, Sakayanagi. Oh, this isn’t related to our conversation about Yamamura earlier, but there is something I need to tell you. You do remember that something happened during the Uninhabited Island Exam that put me in your ‘debt,’ right?” I asked.

That was one of the reasons I had for making this appointment with Sakayanagi and forcing her to make time for me.

“Come to think of it, yes, that did happen,” said Sakayanagi.

“I don’t intend to pour my efforts into making a prediction of whether you or Ryuen will win your little bet tomorrow. I’m deliberately choosing to think of it as an equal 50/50 percent chance,” I told her.

“Meaning that, if I fail, you will miss your chance to repay that debt, I suppose,” said Sakayanagi.

“Yeah. Which is why I wanted to check in ahead of time. I can pay you back right now, if necessary,” I said.

I avoided expressing it directly, but I was sure that Sakayanagi immediately understood what I was trying to say. I knew that she would never demand it, though.

“My answer goes without saying.”

“I figured as much.”

To get an edge over Ryuen in the special exam, you’ll need my help. There was no way that Sakayanagi would take such an approach, depending on others like that. I asked even knowing that full well.

“I will have you repay the debt you owe in our third year,” said Sakayanagi.

“All right, then I’ll plan on that,” I replied.

“Please do so,” she said, then yawned again.

“I think it’s probably time we end the call,” I told her.

“Are you sure that you want to hang up already? I would like to continue our conversation...”

“This is enough for today. I have a good understanding of how each class leader is doing.”

“Is that so? After the End-of-Year Special Exam is sorted out, let’s enjoy a nice cup of tea, at our leisure. After *he’s* dealt with, the competition between you and I will be waiting for us in our third-year, Ayanokouji-kun.”

I decided to end our conversation here, since her yawns were becoming increasingly mixed in among her words.

“Could we please...end the call here, then, Ayanokouji-kun? I would like to go to sleep with this peaceful feeling... Goodnight.”

Sakayanagi hadn't acted nervous at all, and was calm and composed throughout our entire call. In fact, she was beginning to show a side of herself where she was letting her newfound emotions take over. That, too, must have been another aspect of her growth.

After I ended the call, I took off my clothes and changed into my pajamas.

Ryuen and Sakayanagi. I could assume that both of them were fully prepared for the End-of-Year Special Exam. Tomorrow, one of them...would be defeated and leave the school.

I should just stand by and watch how things unfold as an observer; that would be the correct approach. However, speaking from the heart, what *would* my desired outcome be? I tried not to think about it, but I did have a clear preference. Which of them would I like to win? Even before our conversations, I already had an answer to that question...

Chapter 4:

The End-of-Year Special Exam Begins

YOU COULD FEEL SPRING in the warm, gentle sunshine today. The time had finally come for the culmination of the second year of our careers here at this school.

Those who were leading the pack for two years as the unshakeable Class A and were now trying to pull ahead of the rest once again.

Those who had started off doing well, then were slowly overtaken and fell to Class D, only to become united in solidarity in rising up.

Those who, even though they weren't strong enough on their own, would continue to fight using any means at their disposal, taking every chance they saw to turn the tables and make a comeback.

Those who started in Class D, lost all of their Class Points, and who were now trying to reach for Class A, their dearest wish.

The End-of-Year Special Exam was going to be held soon, with the promise of huge changes in Class Points. It was 7:40 a.m. when I left my dormitory room, alone. I didn't see a single other student until I reached the lobby, and even then, everything was quiet, as it should be.

While the representatives for the End-of-Year Special Exam were supposed to meet in the special building at eight o'clock this morning, most of our classmates were to meet in their classrooms at nine o'clock, like normal, so some of them were probably still sleeping. It would've been fine even if I had bumped into another representative, but because the special building was about a ten-minute walk from here, leaving at forty minutes past the hour was cutting it quite close.

I was sure that almost everyone had either already arrived at the school or was about to. As I was walking along the path to the school building, I spotted a solitary student sitting on a bench, dressed in casual attire.

"It's rather early in the morning, isn't it? What are you doing in a place like this, Kiryuuin-senpai?" I asked.

"I've been waiting for you. I wanted to catch a glimpse of you

before you took your final special exam for the year,” she replied.

As she said that, I noticed that her bag was sitting next to her.

“It looks like you’re heading out now,” I said.

“Normally, third-year students have already long since gone out into the world by now, after their graduation ceremony. I’m no exception. I’ve been busy looking for a new place to live. Nagumo was concerned about you, though. He was wondering how you’ll fare in your End-of-Year Special Exam. Moreover, he apparently doesn’t intend to meet with you directly anymore, leaving the reconnaissance entirely to me, 100 percent,” said Kiryuuin.

She was talking like she had been forced into taking on a bothersome role, but it should’ve been easy for her to have refused it.

“So you’re worrying about me, eh? You’re both such kind senpai,” I teased.

“Excuse me, but ‘worrying’ is an exaggeration. Rude. Still, you do calmly pull off unpredictable feats. I look forward to seeing the results of your exam,” said Kiryuuin.

Perhaps because she knew that I was in a hurry, Kiryuuin-senpai gently waved goodbye to me after saying that. After giving Kiryuuin a slight bow, I got moving again and headed to the school itself. Soon afterward, I arrived at the special building and found two representatives from my class were waiting for me by the door to the classroom, and an adult that I wasn’t familiar with was standing beside them. I had the impression that most special exams were attended by the school’s teachers, but perhaps this one was different.

“Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun,” Yousuke greeted me, with a bright smile that was just as cheery as a girl’s.

Horikita, on the other hand, seemed to be in a poor mood, perhaps unhappy about being kept waiting. “You got here very late. We’re the last to arrive,” she snapped with a shrill voice and stiff expression.

“I’m on time though, so there shouldn’t be a problem,” I replied.

“Yes, but... Well, whatever. ...It’s a trivial matter now. Let’s go,” said Horikita.

The End-of-Year Special Exam that we had been waiting for was officially underway. I was sure that she must have been anxiously

watching the minutes go by since this morning, or even since last night. When Horikita reported to the adult that we were all present, the door was opened and we entered the room. Inside, I saw that the three representatives from each of the other classes had arrived before us, making for a total of nine people already seated on pipe chairs in the classroom.

Sakayanagi, Ryuen, and Ichinose all seemed to have made it here today without any problems. Some of the people inside turned around as we entered the room. No doubt it was to confirm who the representatives of our class would be, which was especially important for Ichinose's class. My eyes met with Kanzaki's, who until the last minute had been fearing that I was going to be representative.

I guess that he must have been able to brace himself thanks to information received prior, because while he didn't seem surprised, I could tell that he clearly didn't welcome the idea of me being here. It wasn't very difficult to imagine what he was thinking. Most likely something like, "*So, he came after all.*" I felt bad, but I had my reasons, and others' feelings in the matter couldn't take priority.

Horikita and Yousuke were also learning who the other representatives were for the first time, in this public space. Just as we started walking over to take our seats, Sakagami-sensei and Hoshinomiya-sensei approached. Sakagami-sensei was holding an empty white case with both hands, about thirty centimeters in both length and width, with the words "2-B" written on it.

"Please hand over your phones, as well as any metal or other electronic devices that you have on you," he announced, lowering his gaze down to the case.

I took my phone out of my pocket and placed it in the white case. Horikita and Yousuke also took out their cell phones and followed suit.

"All right, folks! Hold still for just a second. We're going to search you," announced Hoshinomiya-sensei.

Then, Hoshinomiya-sensei began to examine me from head to toe with some kind of device in her hand, probably a handheld metal detector.

"Wow, this is really thorough, isn't it?" asked Yousuke once they were finished searching him and it became Horikita's turn.

"Sorry about this. School orders, after all. Okay, these three have

been checked and are A-OK,” said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

Sakagami-sensei nodded.

“The phones that you’ve handed over will be returned to you after the exam. Take an empty seat and wait,” said Sakagami-sensei.

The three of us went over to the three available pipe chairs and sat down, then I stared intently at the backs of the representatives. Hamaguchi and Kanzaki from Ichinose’s Class D, our opponents. I had figured that Ichinose and Kanzaki were a sure thing. So, they had brought Hamaguchi as their third, eh? His overall ability was in the same category as Hirata’s, and he was the “honor student” type, unlikely to be involved in any big trouble.

You could say that was probably what Horikita and the others from her class had figured as a likely choice, based on their assumptions. However...

There were some unexpected selections for Sakayanagi’s class and Ryuen’s class.

“What is the meaning of this?” muttered Horikita.

First of all, more than anything else, Horikita was astonished not by Katsuragi being there, but by who his fellow class representative was. This surprised Yousuke standing next to her too, not to mention myself. That was because you could tell that Nishino Takeko was clearly a mismatch for this special exam, which would likely require a high level of overall ability. The person in question, perhaps fully aware herself that she was out of place here, had her arms crossed and looked somewhat uncomfortable. There was a rule that at least one male and one female must be selected to appear among the three representatives, but even so, I didn’t expect that it would be Nishino.

“I see they’ve made a deliberate display of their *originality*,” Horikita remarked dryly.

“I didn’t think that they would appoint Nishino-san to the role either. Ayanokouji-kun, do you know what their game might be?” asked Yousuke.

“Nope. Maybe they’re trying to catch their opponent by surprise by doing something unexpected. Even so, this is too much,” I replied.

It wasn’t that Nishino was a bad student. Even if she didn’t leave much of an impression on us, she was probably relatively prominent in

Ryuuen's class. The courage she displayed with her strong, confident attitude in standing up to Ryuuen was admirable. However, she'd been somehow hand-picked from a group of students who excelled in terms of overall ability.

"Maybe it's possible that they had an absence due to illness or something like that?" wondered Yousuke.

"I see... So you're saying that someone else was slated to be their representative, but she had to fill in? Even in that case, I have to wonder, would they really choose Nishino-san for the job...?" replied Horikita.

Indeed, it was questionable that she'd even be selected to fill in as a substitute. However, there was still some doubt as to whether there were any other girls in Ryuuen's class who would be worthy of being entrusted with the task in the first place.

"I had thought that Shiina-san would have been chosen to satisfy the girl quota. Is she absent?" asked Horikita.

Apparently, Horikita's expectation was that Hiyori would have been selected. If Hiyori were unable to participate as a representative due to illness, that would be a reasonable explanation. However, I considered another possibility.

"To be perfectly honest, there aren't many worthy candidates among the girls in Ryuuen's class. This special exam appears to be focused solely on the representatives, but the school says that the rest of our classmates will also be given a big role to play. It's quite possible that they deliberately chose to leave Hiyori on that side of the fence," I reasoned.

"I see... You've got a point there; they may have made their choice with the intent of dispersing their forces..." said Horikita.

Our class had several candidates who could have been representatives, which meant that we had the leeway to have students like Kushida and Matsushita as alternates. The same couldn't be said for Ryuuen's class.

"Besides, whether Hiyori would excel in a situation where representatives fight each other is another matter," I added.

Unless we heard a definite answer from Ryuuen's side, all of this was simply speculation. Nevertheless, even if there was some deeper

intention behind this, choosing Nishino as a representative was a gamble. Ryuuen might end up shouldering one disadvantage in this scenario. Or perhaps...

He might've been expressing his belief that, so long as he himself participated as a representative, then it didn't matter who else from his class was at his side. If so, it would certainly make a strong statement to his opponent. But his opponent was none other than the tricky, stubborn Sakayanagi, who was more than she seemed.

Sakayanagi's choice of representatives didn't have the same impact as Nishino, but it was similarly surprising. Namely, her selection of Kitou Hayato. Kitou was part of Sakayanagi's inner circle and, looking at it from the standpoint of his position, it wasn't surprising that he was chosen. However, there was the question of whether it made sense to purposefully choose Kitou, who excelled in athletics, to be a representative when the abilities required of us were *not* likely to be physical. Maybe there was some hint of Sakayanagi's thinking in her choice of representative as well.

If I could, I would have liked to ask each of the class leaders about the logic behind their selections, but that sadly wasn't possible. All of the representatives were here, but there wasn't any sign of the school officials making a move yet.

“Phew...”

Horikita exhaled beside me. A tense situation might make one feel a heavy pressure, but that was a little excessive. Yousuke was also examining the situation with concern. If the exam started with things as they were, things could go sour for Horikita. On the other hand, a poorly worded comment ran the risk of heightening the tension.

Among several possible solutions, one came to mind that seemed like it would be the most effective right now. I steeled myself, ready for death. *Let's see what happens, shall we?* Then I stealthily reached out with my right hand and grabbed hold of Horikita's left flank as hard as I could.

“Hyah?!”

Horikita jumped out of her seat with a start. At the same time, a girl's voice echoed throughout the oppressively quiet classroom. Many of the representatives, who had been facing forward until that moment, turned around to see what had made such a noise. Horikita, flustered,

shook her head, telling them that it was nothing before casting her eyes downward in an attempt to escape from their suspicious looks.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Horikita hissed at me.

“I was just trying to relieve your anxiety. Did it make you feel a little better?” I asked her.

“But I’m asking you, was it necessary for you to do it in *that* way?!” she retorted, punctuating her grumbling whisper to me with a serious look on her face.

“I thought I’d throw some nostalgia into the mix, to spice things up. It’s my own way of showing consideration,” I replied.

“I don’t need that kind of consideration!”

The other representatives were no longer looking in our direction, but Yousuke seemed pleased—relieved, even—to see Horikita complaining and me being complained at. At that moment, there was movement in the room. As if to announce the start of the special exam, Mashima-sensei and Chabashira-sensei entered the room.

“Come on now, you should probably be quiet,” I teased.

“You’d better not forget about this,” grumbled Horikita.

I had incurred Horikita’s bitter resentment, but for the time being, I could concentrate and listen to the explanation now that all of the homeroom teachers in charge of the second-year classes had arrived. One of them, the homeroom teacher for Class 2-A, stepped forward.

“I am Mashima, and I will be filling the role of explaining this End-of-Year Special Exam to you. This may seem rather sudden, but as time is of the essence, I would like to get you prepared for the start of the special exam as soon as possible. Accordingly, I will also provide you with the detailed rules of the special exam, which have not yet been disclosed to you.”

Mashima-sensei went on to say that the special exam would begin at ten o’clock, and then went over the finer points. Considering it was currently just past 8 a.m., it seemed like there was too much time allotted for us to be here for just a simple explanation. It was highly likely that we would undergo further preparations of some sort before the special exam properly began.

“First of all, I would like to announce the names of the final three students from each class here as representatives today.”

Class 2-A Representatives

Vanguard: Sanada Kousei

Center: Kitou Hayato

General: Sakayanagi Arisu

Class 2-B Representatives

Vanguard: Hirata Yousuke

Center: Horikita Suzune

General: Ayanokouji Kiyotaka

Class 2-C Representatives

Vanguard: Nishino Takeko

Center: Katsuragi Kouhei

General: Ryuen Kakeru

Class 2-D Representatives

Vanguard: Hamaguchi Tetsuya

Center: Kanzaki Ryuuji

General: Ichinose Honami

The first thing that appeared on the room's monitor was a list of the representatives from each class, along with their roles on their respective teams. As stipulated in the rules, each class was organized into a team of two boys and one girl. There was no mention of absences or substitutes, though whether that was because the rules didn't require disclosure of such information or because there simply weren't any was unclear.

However, at this point, the twelve representatives were set in stone. If anything rendered a student unable to participate, they would automatically be treated as though they had failed the exam. Without taking any questions from the representatives, Mashima-sensei

continued the explanation.

“This is where the representatives will take to the stage. You will likely notice that the classroom is furnished with several monitors, desks with two chairs each, and two tablets. In this classroom, classes A and C will face off against each other, and there is another classroom in the special building with this exact same setup, wherein classes B and D will face off against each other,” explained Mashima-sensei.

As long as it was a one-on-one arrangement, it seemed safe to assume that the setup would be similar to the final special exam we had in our first year.

“When the special exam begins, the vanguard representatives of each class will take their seats and the representatives assigned to the center and general positions will be held in a separate waiting room. Let’s go over the exam flow.”

Mashima-sensei displayed the exam summary on one of the monitors.

Special Exam Flow

Students will engage in discussion after being cast in one of the following roles: average student, model student, teacher, graduate, underclassman, upperclassman, or traitor.

Preliminary Preparation

Representatives from each class will create five groups of seven students of their choosing.

- The same group cannot be used consecutively and must be given a break once.
- If there are fewer than thirty-five participants, the same person will be allowed to join a second group if necessary.

Each class’s representative will select one group to participate in the discussion on their tablet.

The discussion will involve a total of fourteen participants, seven from each class, and will be observed on the monitor.

Each singular round of discussion will last for five minutes.

At the end of each round, both representatives are entitled to

nominate one participant and declare the role they believe the participant is playing.

Nominations are limited to one participant per round. If there is no nomination, you may choose to pass. Representatives must enter their selections on their tablets within one minute.

The Life Points of the representatives will fluctuate depending on whether or not they were correct in determining the role of the selected participants.

Teachers and graduates exercise the effects of their roles at this time.

If one or more representatives pass, a model student will eject one participant from the room. (The representative's Life Points will not increase or decrease even if one of their position holders is chosen at that time.)

The discussion ends for the one to two students chosen by the representatives or model student, and that student or students will be ejected from the room. (If the representative correctly identifies the participant's role in their nomination, the participant's role will be disclosed; however, the role will not be disclosed in the case of the nomination of a model student.)

The discussion ends when all of the average students or model students leave the room.

If the representative runs out of Life Points, the discussion ends, regardless of the timing.

The exam ends when a general runs out of Life Points.

If the generals from both classes run out of Life Points at the same time, they will fight again with one Life Point each. This process will be repeated until a conclusion is reached.

There will be an interval at the end of each discussion and when the representatives change.

As the details of the special exam were revealed to us, the full picture of the exam slowly came into view. Meanwhile, Mashima-sensei observed the representatives as he continued going through the explanation on the monitor.

“The fundamental flow of this special exam is repeated in steps one through five. I’m sure that there are a few items that might have attracted your notice, and I will explain them in order. First, the ‘participants’ are all of the remaining students other than you, the representatives. The core of this exam is that you will have those students engage in discussion. I will now go over the content of those discussions. Please have a look,” said Mashima-sensei.

Discussion

Discussion will be held in order to determine the roles that were assigned to the fourteen participants individually.

The discussion ends when the number of either average students or model students is reduced to zero, or when the representative runs out of Life Points. (In that case, all remaining students in the discussion will receive 5,000 Private Points.)

Representatives can nominate average students, model students, and traitors under the broad category of “position holder,” but in that case, their specific position will not be disclosed because it does not count as a correct nomination.

Students other than the representatives waiting on standby can observe the discussion on the monitor.

If both representatives make successful nominations in the same round, the Life Point offset process is resolved first.

List of roles assigned to participants and the number of participants:

Average students

Between six and eight people

Students who have not been given any special authority of any kind. In the event of an erroneous nomination (including nomination as position holder), the nominating representative loses one Life Point.

Model students

Two people

If you are successful in identifying a model student, you reduce the Life Points of the opposing representative by three points per nomination. In the event of an erroneous nomination (including nomination as position holder), the nominating representative loses two Life Points. Model students are aware of each other and have shared presence. If one or more representatives pass, one participant is nominated at the end of the round and removed from the room. (In the event that two participants remain, the right to nominate is granted at random. Also, a model student cannot nominate a model student.)

Teacher

One person

A successful nomination as position holder reduces the opponent's Life Points by one point, and a successful nomination as teacher reduces the opponent's Life Points by two points. In the event of an erroneous nomination (including nomination as a position holder), the nominating representative loses two Life Points.

Effect: At the end of each round, the teacher can block the nomination of one student from a model student one time.

Graduate

One person

A successful nomination as position holder reduces the opponent's Life Points by one point, and a successful nomination as graduate reduces the opponent's Life Points by two points. In the event of an erroneous nomination (including nomination as a position holder), the nominating representative loses two Life Points.

Effect: At the end of each round, the graduate may nominate one student to find out what their role is. However, as for traitors, their identity cannot be discovered, so graduates will perceive them as average students.

Underclassman

One person

A successful nomination as position holder will recover one Life

Point, and a successful nomination as underclassman will recover two Life Points. In the event of an erroneous nomination (including nomination as a position holder), the nominating representative loses one Life Point.

Upperclassman

One person

A successful nomination as position holder reduces the opponent's Life Points by one point, and a successful nomination as upperclassman will reduce the opponent's Life Points by one point and cause the roles of two random participants to be disclosed to the representative. In the event of an erroneous nomination (including nomination as a position holder), the nominating representative loses one Life Point.

Traitor

Zero to two people

* Each class may only use this role once during the exam.

Representatives can designate one participant from the opposing class participating in the discussion to be a traitor. Each round, the role of one participant taking part in the discussion (excluding model students) is randomly disclosed to the representative who has been designated the traitor. In the event of an erroneous nomination (including nomination as a position holder), the nominating representative loses two Life Points, and the opponent's right to assign a traitor is restored. If a model student tries to eject a traitor from the room, it will be regarded as blocked, and the student will not be ejected from the room. The traitor will not be ejected from the room except in the event of an erroneous nomination from the opponent or if the representative determines that they are not a traitor in the dialogue.

Individual Role Rewards

If the average students win, all average students will receive 10,000 Private Points.

Model students earn 5,000 Private Points each time a student who is a position holder is nominated. Also, if model students win, they will

receive 500,000 Private Points.

If teachers and/or graduates do not leave the room before the end of the discussion, they will receive 50,000 Private Points.

If an upperclassman or underclassman is ejected from the room at the hands of a model student, the student cast in that role will receive 50,000 Private Points.

If the traitor does not get ejected from the room before the end of the discussion, that student will receive their choice of either 5,000,000 Private Points or 50 Class Points.

After explaining the roles of the participants and their effects, Mashima-sensei pulled out a tablet, the kind that would actually be used during the exam, and displayed something on its screen. Shown on the tablet were the names of fourteen participants and an option for passing, as an example of the interface we would be using. If we wanted to select *pass*, we would have to confirm twice. If we wanted to nominate someone, we would first tap on a name, then select either a position holder or the name of their role (if we wished to name it), and then we would confirm our selection. That was the process. Since there wasn't any need to nominate average students, there was no option for them.

“You representatives seated here bear an important job, one that will play a key role in whether your class wins or loses, but naturally your classmates will also have a major influence on whether you will win or lose. The rules may look complicated, but you’ve experienced something similar in your first year, in the exam aboard the boat, the Summer Group Special Examination. If you liken it to that, you might understand it more quickly,” said Mashima-sensei.

The Summer Group Special Examination, the exam from our first year. I didn't know anything about social deduction games like this at the time, but the exam employed a system close to the game Werewolf, where we were to find which students were designated as VIPs. I didn't know anything about the real world back then, so I had never heard of games like that. I've acquired a lot of unexpected knowledge since, something that I would also describe as growth. Come to think of it, Mashima-sensei was also the one who had explained the Summer Group Special Examination to us then. I thought back to that particular event as I listened to him now.

“If both representatives are successful in their nominations, the offset process is carried out. In the case of an underclassman, it’s a bit of a special case. Let’s say that, in this hypothetical instance, Representative A has correctly identified an underclassman, while Representative B nominated a teacher as a position holder, and both are correct. In that scenario, a subtraction is made, and A’s Life Points are restored by one point,” explained Mashima-sensei.

Which meant that your results would be compared with your opponent’s results, and that would be reflected in the final process, huh.

“You representatives may wish to join in the discussion, but during the exam, you can only watch and listen to the discussion over the monitor. You cannot direct it in any way. Also, it is impossible for representatives who aren’t actively participating in the exam to observe the discussions,” added Mashima-sensei.

Participants would discuss among themselves, and a winner would be decided by the fourteen of them. From the sound of it, the representatives, fighting from the other side of the monitor, would watch over the discussion and be given the right to nominate who to eliminate. I found it unusual that only when one of the representatives passed for the first time would the model students participating in the discussion be given the right to decide who to eject from the room, though. If an inherently competent representative were participating in the discussion, that person could use a student’s own responses to seek out anyone suspicious and ask questions to determine the roles of students they suspected, but that wasn’t possible over the monitor. Which meant that the participants were the ones entrusted to do most of the deducing.

“The various roles can greatly affect the representative’s life. The role known as the traitor in particular, a role that can only be used once, may have an even greater impact on the outcome of the exam than the other roles. Suppose, for example, that A designates one of the students in B’s class as the traitor. As long as this traitor remains in the discussion, the role of one student participating in the discussion, with the exception of the model student, will be disclosed only to A each and every round. If you don’t discover the traitor and instead leave them to their own devices, they’ll continue to operate for that time period. If, however, in your haste in trying to eliminate the traitor, you make an erroneous nomination, and the traitor does end up getting ejected from the room, you will not only lose Life Points, but you will also end up

reinstating your opponent's right to use a traitor again," explained Mashima-sensei.

Which meant that their role had effects that could bring about both good and bad trends in the special exam. I supposed that was precisely why each class could only use them once at the start, then. You were free to use it right away as your opening move, to try to get a head start to clinch certain victory, or you could pin your hopes on exercising the ability to use the traitor twice due to a false nomination by your opponent, or you could hold onto it until you're up against the opposing center or general, to completely turn things around on them and go for the win. However, the part that concerned me was that, according to the rules so far, we couldn't eliminate a traitor by nomination.

"As for how to discover traitors and remove them from the discussion...this is handled via a special rule that is implemented only when the right to use a traitor has been exercised, wherein at the end of every round, the representative uses their right to call up one student from their own class and engage in 'dialogue' with that student, to ask them if they are the traitor," explained Mashima-sensei.

Dialogue

At the end of every round, if the representative wishes, the representative can engage in one-on-one dialogue with a student in a separate room.

- During dialogue, it is forbidden for either party to discuss the progress of the special exam or the details of the rules.

Engage in dialogue

The participant confesses whether or not they are the traitor. In this instance, they will be asked to give their answer first.

The representative chooses whether to declare the participant as the traitor or judge the participant to be innocent.

Results

If the participant is a traitor:

If the participant confesses to being the traitor and the representative declares they are the traitor: The information flow is stopped, but the traitor is stripped of rewards.

If the participant confesses to being the traitor and the representative determines they are not the traitor: The representative loses five Life Points.

If the participant denies being the traitor and the representative declares they are the traitor: The traitor is expelled from school.

If the participant denies being the traitor and the representative determines they are not the traitor: The representative loses five Life Points.

If the participant is not a traitor:

If the participant confesses to being the traitor and the representative declares they are the traitor: The representative loses one Life Point.

If the participant confesses to being the traitor and the representative determines they are not the traitor: No penalty.

If the participant denies being the traitor and the representative declares they are the traitor: The representative loses one Life Point.

If the participant denies being the traitor and the representative determines they are not the traitor: No penalty.

Which meant that the student being questioned said whether or not they were the traitor first, and then the representative gave their answer as to whether or not they were the traitor afterward, if I understood correctly. It seemed fundamentally unlikely that a non-traitor would pretend to be a traitor, but those potential outcomes were probably included as supplementary information, just in case.

“These rules can be viewed by representatives at any time during the exam on your tablets. You may also speak up during the exam at any time if you have questions. The examiner will answer whatever they are able to provide answers for,” said Mashima-sensei.

There was indeed a wide assortment of rules. If a student retained all of that information in their head, they wouldn’t have any questions,

but it was a welcome consideration, as I'm sure that some students would appreciate being able to review the rules again.

"If it isn't a bother...I have a question. Would that be all right?"

The representatives had been listening quietly up until this point, but it was Sanada who broke the silence. Once he got Mashima-sensei's permission to go ahead, Sanada stood up and lightly bowed to the other representatives.

"Regarding the explanation that you provided earlier, if, for example, I were to assign a traitor to blend in among my opponent's participants, wouldn't he or she be exposed immediately? It's certainly true that it would be great to be able to gain fifty Class Points, if I could keep the traitor hidden until the end. I am also sure that the traitor would want to do their best in playing their role for the sake of their class. Furthermore, putting the question of whether the student seriously wants it or not aside, there's the motivation of money too. But if students understand that there are significant disadvantages for the traitor to remain in the discussion, I think that the majority of them would come forward and say themselves that they had been assigned the traitor, even if it's over the monitor. Wouldn't they?" asked Sanada.

If the discussion can unfold in a battle happening on equal terms, the truth would not be revealed so easily because of the possibility of lies, even if they came forward. But as Sanada said, the traitors alone were in a special category. Considering the rules of how your opponent can exercise their rights, basically, only one person could be called at a time. It would be a different story if there was a real, actual backstabber who was deliberately trying to confuse their classmates, but something at that level wouldn't even be worth considering.

"That is a fair question, but I can't imagine it'd play out that way. This is because the participants will receive a somewhat different explanation than what you representatives have received," explained Mashima-sensei.

"A different...explanation?" asked Sanada.

"Yes. The winning conditions and rules for the delegates, which we've disclosed to you here, will be communicated in a more limited way to the representatives, so they will not know the details. From the representative's point of view, finding the model student is the key to winning, but for the students participating in the discussion, they are only discussing as average students, model students, and other

positions, for the sole purpose of debate,” said Mashima-sensei.

In other words, the discussion of this special exam, its content, was essentially meaningless. If the representative’s goal of finding the model students was made known to the participants, then, although this was a bit of an exaggeration, all they’d have to do was make a verbal appeal. Because even if the opposing representative would lie, there would be no benefit for students in your own class to lie. Apparently, the school had put a lid on the real rules in order to resolve that discrepancy. As a result, they adjusted things so that the representatives and participants would fight by their own set of rules. Of course, I’m sure that some of the participants would find this unnatural.

Some of them might be able to guess what the representatives were doing and how they were fighting in the course of the discussion. However, without knowing crucial details like the nominations of the representatives, the Life Point values, and the characteristics of the roles, they couldn’t act carelessly. It was quite conceivable that revealing oneself openly could then bring about a disadvantage. The same applied to the risks and rewards of the traitor. Even if they managed to get all the way to a dialogue with a representative, it would be a serious struggle to avoid being found out in order to get the fifty Class Points.

However, that chance to confess would be the locus if the traitor was brought into a dialogue. If they denied it and the representative declared them to be a traitor, they’d face expulsion. It could be said that there were several skills that this special exam required. It was essential to know not only your own classmates, but also to be familiar with your opponent’s classmates. Therefore, the degree of difficulty would vary greatly depending on how well you know the way each student spoke, behaved, and otherwise presented themselves in everyday life. Also, the greater your level of insight and the stronger your observational skills, the better, so as not to overlook even the smallest of details. In addition, since the representatives were in a position to be able to talk with each other, it was better to have the mental fortitude not to be misled by careless guidance.

On the other hand, you could say that this proved physical ability wasn’t necessary and that the exam had little to do with academic ability either, just like Chabashira-sensei said. The fact that no one seemed to be absent due to illness also suggested that Ryuuken’s deliberate choice to not make Hiyori a representative for his class might

not have been a bad decision. She was a valuable asset for Class C, since there were few people in that class capable of smoothly facilitating discussion. Although it was impossible to determine everything at this stage, it could be said that the fact that this wasn't a contest centered on academic ability and the fact that Hiyori wasn't chosen as a representative seemed to have given Ryuen a bit of a tailwind.

4.1

AS THINGS GOT STARTED, the twelve of us headed to the classroom, where we would wait on standby and rest. Along the way, the conversation inevitably turned to the topic of the special exam. Horikita and Yousuke were discussing the rules for the participants.

"Although we won't be directly affected until after the exam, the burden is greater than I imagined, and even the students who aren't representatives have been given an important job," said Horikita.

"Yeah. Actually, it's safe to say that even we, the representatives, won't be able to win without the cooperation of our class participants," replied Yousuke.

If a participant engaged in the discussion without thinking, and easily fell for attempts from the opposing class to lead them around by the nose, then it was possible that their role would be detected by the opposing representative, and your Life Points would be reduced. I could envision cases where the information on the participants that was needed couldn't be obtained due them making light of or having a disdain for discussion, and thus you wouldn't get an opportunity to reduce the opponent's Life Points because you wouldn't be able to nominate anyone. Or there could be times when there just weren't any clues at all, and the winner was determined entirely by chance alone. It was safe to say this was a turn of events no one wanted, save for the classes who weren't confident that they could win on their own power.

"I'm anxious about how much of this Ike-kun and his group will understand, though," said Horikita.

Apparently, Horikita was unsure whether Ike and his friends would be able to properly fulfill their duties as participants. I'm sure

that if she could, Horikita would have given Ike a direct explanation right now, in plain terms, to make him understand. That was the thing she'd normally do, but it wasn't allowed here, on this big stage.

"I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't anxious, but I'm sure the other classes are too," muttered Yousuke, walking at the tail end of the line, looking at the nine students in front of us.

"Right. The conditions are exactly the same. This discussion task is a first-time experience for everyone," said Horikita.

"We'll probably have a bumpy start. Since it's a showdown between classes, normally, you would think of it like a seven-on-seven format. But in reality, it's entirely possible that students cast into the same roles will be allies. The idea of working with another class in the end-of-year exam must have come as a sudden shock to everyone," I reasoned.

Even if people were directly asked to join hands and work together, it was something easier said than done.

"Honestly, I can't even imagine how things are going to go," said Yousuke.

Yousuke tried to envision what the situation would be like, but he soon gave up, perhaps because he couldn't form a definite image of it in his mind. We continued our conversation in the short time until we arrived at our destination. Unlike the classroom we had just been in, the waiting room that we entered only had two monitors, and its only other feature was an array of twelve sterile, empty seats.

"Students waiting on standby will be able to see the status of the exam on these monitors in real time. However, they can only check the changes in representatives' Life Point values and who wins or loses. As I explained earlier, they cannot see what is happening in the exam directly," said Mashima-sensei.

Text that looked like a sample was displayed on the left side of the two monitors.

Results

Class 2-B Vanguard

Representative Name: OO – Remaining Life Points: 0

Class 2-D Center

Representative Name: OO – Remaining Life Points: 4

Class 2-B Center

Representative Name OO, please begin your turn promptly.

Interval – Time Remaining: 10:00

“This is an example of what would be shown on the monitor when a winner is decided between representatives. During the actual exam, the student’s name will be shown where it says ‘OO’ by representative name. On the other monitor, only the results for classes A and C will be shown,” announced Mashima-sensei. There was little to be learned from this monitor, and certainly no clues to utilize in exam strategies. “Also, representatives are forbidden to leave this floor until the exam is over. You are free to use the washroom only while you are on standby. Note that you will be given a separate penalty if you exceed the allotted time provided to you when you are moving about between turns. Keep that in mind.”

That was probably a measure to keep the representatives and participants isolated from each other, so that they only stayed within their groups. Confiscating our phones and conducting a body search, along with forbidding us from leaving this floor, were also part of those measures to prevent us from exchanging information with the participants. Even if we tried to find a way to contact them, we were most certainly being observed very closely, and it would probably be best not to do anything suspicious if we didn’t really need to.

“Now, I would like to have the three representatives from each class discuss and select thirty-five people and divide them into five groups. You have one hour,” said Mashima-sensei.

Upon receiving Mashima-sensei’s orders, Yousuke and I walked over to Horikita. At the same time, I noticed that the representatives from Ichinose’s class had also formed a small circle of three. However, as for Sakayanagi and Ryuen’s respective groups, although they were standing close to each other, they didn’t appear to be talking among

themselves.

“It seems like those two are going to make all of their groups just by themselves,” murmured Horikita, not sounding particularly surprised.

“I guess they didn’t intend to listen to their classmates’ opinions from the start, huh?” replied Yousuke, responding to her comment to show he was paying attention.

Though she seemed somewhat taken aback, he didn’t let the warm smile on his face fade.

“Personally, if you’re able to offer me any advice, I would most certainly like to take it. What do you think?” she asked, prompting my opinion as she tried to figure out how she should divide up our classmates.

“I think that we ought to create a group of only excellent students. The same group has to take a break once after they participate, but I think just doing that would be a way to get an ace up our sleeve,” I replied.

When I said “excellent” students, I wasn’t referring to academic ability. What I meant was students who were quick-witted, who could read the room, and who had excellent communication skills. Additionally, students who could avoid attracting negative attention were preferable.

“I think that Kushida-san might have been a better choice for representative than I am for this special exam,” said Yousuke.

“There’s nothing we can do about that now. I made the best judgment I could based on the information provided to us ahead of time,” said Horikita.

If we had known everything, we could have planned out the best possible approach—and that went for all the classes.

“At any rate, it would be a good idea to count Kushida as an excellent student,” I replied.

“Yes. I have no doubt that Kushida-san will produce results, even on an individual level,” said Yousuke, nodding in response to my suggestion and looking over at Horikita.

“I sacrificed a lot to keep her,” she replied. “I’ll need her to really put in the work.”

With that, Horikita used the tablet to put together a specific group of solidly capable students. Horikita asked me and Yousuke for advice from time to time, and Yousuke answered to the best of his knowledge. I mostly just watched and rarely offered up advice without being asked. That was because Horikita needed to put together the groups that she thought would best handle things on her own as our assigned center.

“By the way...what did you think about this special exam, Horikita-san, when you heard the rules?” asked Yousuke.

Yousuke, being Yousuke, must have had his own thoughts on the matter after hearing the details earlier. He hit Horikita with that question as though he were seeking an answer to his own thoughts.

“I didn’t think that academic ability or physical ability alone would be the only things to directly affect the outcome of our exams or anything, but this was certainly well outside my expectations. In fact, I’m not sure what exactly will make the difference between winning and losing here. Sure, someone could say that it’s to create an ideal group, but what exactly is that ideal?” asked Horikita.

“Yeah. It all feels so fuzzy to me too. It’s like, even if we put together students like Kushida-san in one group, how is that going to lead to a win for our class?” wondered Yousuke.

The representatives in this room and the participants in the debate were made up of students gathered from two different classes. Furthermore, the participants weren’t fully informed on things like the winning conditions for the representatives and couldn’t be expected to provide any real assistance since they were simply expected to engage in debate. In other words, the issue of whether the students in a certain group were excellent was trivial. What was important was to see which representative could quickly identify who held what roles from the discussion being guided by the fourteen students that had been put together, solely through what they said.

“At the very least, representatives need to be people who have a discerning eye, as well as insight, and the ability to see things for what they are,” said Yousuke.

“Yes, I agree. But, in that case, then our opponent might be more trouble than we imagined,” said Horikita, stealing a glance over at Ichinose.

Fortunately for Horikita, Ichinose and her fellow representatives

were engaged in serious discussion about group formation, and none of them were looking in our direction.

“This may not be tactful for me to say, but she might understand our own class better than even you or I do, Horikita,” I added.

“You’re probably right,” said Horikita.

I felt like this was going to be a fairly interesting special exam. I especially appreciated the fact that the format accounted for several ways the representatives could win. In most cases, certain biases about who would win and who would lose came out once the exam contents were announced, but here, Horikita, Ichinose, Sakayanagi, and Ryuen each had a chance to win depending on how they went about it.

Under Horikita’s leadership, and with Yousuke’s assistance, our groups were formed. As I watched them, I felt like there was just one thing that I needed to ask and confirm. That was because after carefully reading through and analyzing the special exam rules, there was something that I felt was necessary.

“I want to come right out and ask you about something that has nothing to do with group formation. Could you hand the right to designate a traitor over to me?” I asked.

At my question, Horikita’s fingertips stopped skittering across the tablet’s surface.

“You’re asking something ridiculous yet again, I see. You’re the one who dumped these conditions on me. I had thought that would’ve been an indispensable trump card to make sure I gain the upper hand as the center. And yet you’re asking for it?” huffed Horikita.

Indeed, I was sure that Horikita was mentally prepared to try to defeat the opposing general, as the center on our team. And I’m sure she wanted to exercise her right to designate a traitor, which had the potential to be of great use as a weapon in that regard. But it was precisely because she thought so that I decided to butt in at this moment and ask.

“You sound a bit disgruntled. I take it you won’t be handing it over to me, huh?” I asked.

“That depends on the situation. First of all, what exactly do you need it for?” asked Horikita.

Her question was also her way of confirming something else with

me, namely, *Can't you win without it?*

“Our opponent is Ichinose. If I’m understanding the rules correctly, she’s going to be a very formidable opponent this time around. I’d appreciate it if you could win it all as the center and not make me have to take a turn, but as unlikely as it is, there’s a risk that you’ll lose after using the right to assign a traitor. With that in mind, I think it’s a better idea to leave that option open as a contingency,” I replied.

“I understand what you’re trying to say, I really do. You might even be right. Still, I cannot accept unless you relax your conditions at least a little,” replied Horikita.

If Horikita handed over the right to designate a traitor, then that would mean she would have to defeat Ichinose, who still had that right. In addition to the difference in Life Points, that handicap would weigh heavily on her.

“All right, then. In that case, how about this? If you let me handle it and we still lose, I’ll cooperate fully with your class until we graduate, Horikita. Once we do, then if you wish, I’ll take on any job you want. What do you say?” I asked.

“Meaning you’ll withdraw your ridiculously stingy statement about only helping for six months?” asked Horikita.

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying,” I replied.

“I don’t usually see you so willing to collaborate. You sound confident that as long as you can assign the traitor, you will definitely not lose... Okay, we have an agreement,” said Horikita.

I had no idea that my short-lived proposal of six months would bear such fruit.

“Though, if I can gain that much cooperation from you, I don’t mind if we lose. Should I cut corners then?” Horikita replied, with a hint of a mean-spirited smirk.

Of course, there was no way that Horikita was going to slack off. Though we only had an hour to assign the groups, none of the classes struggled with this, and in about forty minutes all of them had finished. Afterward, we returned the tablets to Mashima-sensei. All that was left was to sit down in the empty seats and wait for the signal for the start of the special exam, but...

Nothing about my fundamental approach changed even after having all the rules disclosed to us. However, I would continue pursuing just that one thing I desired, and leave my mark in the process, so I shot Ryuuken a look. Soon afterward, our eyes met, and I signaled to him that I wanted to meet him in the hallway. Perhaps he had grasped my signal loud and clear, because Ryuuken went ahead and left the classroom first.

“I’m gonna stop by the restroom for a minute,” I announced

After casually excusing myself, I went out into the hallway. As I did, a lone figure followed me out of the classroom.

“Ayanokouji-kun.”

Hoshinomiya-sensei approached me, calling to me quietly so as not to disturb the silence that enveloped the hallway.

“Were you just on your way to the restroom? Could I bother you for a minute?” she asked.

I stopped and turned around, and then Hoshinomiya hurriedly closed the distance between us, coming close enough to touch if I reached out.

“I was surprised to see you here as a representative today. I never imagined,” she said.

“Is it really that unexpected? I came forward for last year’s final special exam too,” I replied.

When I brought up a point of comparison to show that it was fitting for me to appear, Hoshinomiya-sensei sniffed a bit. “If you couldn’t tell, I was being snide. There’s nowhere for my class to go anymore. We’re Class D. Do you understand? If you’re here, Ayanokouji-kun, that means our chances of winning go down the drain.”

She came out and told me what she honestly felt, without sugarcoating it or beating around the bush. I felt like she had already crossed a line as a teacher, but I figured it was better to let it slide.

“I don’t think of you as being easy opponents. Ichinose’s class is going to be a formidable foe. If anything, after hearing the rules my impression is that they’ll be even better off,” I replied.

“Advantage, disadvantage. That stuff doesn’t matter. What’s important are results. Victory. That’s it,” said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

It was certainly true that there was no use in clinging to uncertainties.

“Yes, I guess that’s true. All we can do is fight as best we can and —”

“Please give us the win,” pleaded Hoshinomiya-sensei, cutting me off just as I was about to finish my sentence. “I want you to throw the match, convincingly.”

Kanzaki had said something similar, but this was far, far more direct.

“That’s absurd. Besides, as the appointed general, there’s no way I could throw the match,” I replied.

“Please don’t say no. What if I said that I can compensate you for it?”

“There aren’t many things that can be offered as worthy enough compensation for handing over victory. And moreover, you’re a teacher, Hoshinomiya-sensei. Wouldn’t it be breaking an unwritten rule for you to intervene in a student’s battle so carelessly?”

Hoshinomiya-sensei, while still wary of our surroundings, took another half step closer.

“I just can’t lose to Sae-chan. She’s the only person I can’t let myself lose to. For that, I’ll do anything,” said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

“I see. And you’re saying that you don’t care about your position as a teacher, and whatnot?” I replied.

“That’s correct.”

“All right, then, allow me to ask: What kind of compensation are you prepared to offer me, sensei?”

“If I’m capable of it, anything. For example, if I can get information about a special exam in your third year at an early stage, I could secretly pass it along to you,” said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

I asked her that question hoping to see how far she’d step outside of her role as teacher, but that was more than I imagined. If not for the absolute and complete certainty that I didn’t have some kind of recording device on me right now, she would never have said these words, not even as a lie or joke.

“If you are willing to go that far, then why not just pass

information directly to the class that you're currently in charge of?" I asked.

"Not those kids, they can't. They can't be the bad guys. If I suggested something like that to them, they couldn't make use of it. Instead, they'd just try to protect me," said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

Ichinose and her classmates would absolutely try to stop Hoshinomiya-sensei, whose position as a teacher would be in jeopardy. Hoshinomiya-sensei apparently understood that much very well.

"But with you, it'd be a different story, right, Ayanokouji-kun? I know you would make good use of that information," said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

"I appreciate the offer, but the risk is too great. I'm afraid I have to decline," I replied.

I was sure that even Hoshinomiya-sensei must not have thought that I'd accept such a risky offer, after all.

"Okay then, what do you want as compensation? Can you make an offer, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

"I don't have anything particular in mind. I'll just have to wait for you to make another offer," I replied.

"Ugh... Okay, in that case, there is something else. That's right. Something only I can do... Like..." she stammered.

With that, she reached out with her right hand and gently touched my ear.

"Are you going to clean my ears for me?" I asked.

"Stop joking around." said Hoshinomiya. "You understand what I'm trying to say, right?"

She showed me that she was honestly prepared to do whatever it took. If she could do something, she would, no matter how it would make her look.

However, no matter what she offered me in return as compensation, joining forces with Hoshinomiya-sensei was simply too risky. It would be easy to dismiss her as a foolish teacher who wanted to win, but the reality wasn't so simple. Her resolve to do whatever it took to win was, without a doubt, utterly genuine. If that was true, then it was possible that she could take anything I said and use it against me.

After all, words once spoken cannot be taken back. I needed to consider the various risks.

“You have an incredibly disgusted look in your eyes, Ayanokouji-kun. It’s almost as though...you can see right through me, inside my head,” said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

“All that you can do now is believe in Ichinose’s class’s victory,” I told her.

“I suppose that’s your way of saying that you won’t hand over the win, not for anything,” she replied.

“Of course not. Our classes are direct opponents, after all,” I replied.

“In that case, I guess there’s no telling what recourse I have, huh?” she sighed.

“Interesting. I’ll be looking forward to that as well. Please excuse me,” I replied.

With that, I turned away and headed for the bathroom. Hoshinomiya-sensei didn’t call out to me again, and she didn’t seem to be following me either.

Chapter 5: The Battle of the Vanguard

SHORTLY AFTER 9 A.M., the participants arrived in their four separate classrooms and were being given the same explanation simultaneously by examiners unfamiliar to them. There wasn't anything unusual in the classrooms; the only things placed in them were the typical desks and chairs. It was difficult for the students to imagine what kind of exam would take place in a space no different from their regular classroom, but as the explanation proceeded, they began to understand.

The explanation about the discussion conducted by the participants contained no mention whatsoever of the win conditions for the representatives. After finishing explaining all of the details, the examiner took a breath, while the students exchanged looks with one another, seemingly trying their absolute hardest to pound the rules into their heads.

"The most important point to remember is that the only way to contribute to your class in this discussion is to carry out your assigned role perfectly," added the examiner.

That was exactly what Ayanokouji and the other representatives have been told about the participants in the explanation they had been given.

"I understand what our win conditions are, but the win conditions for the representatives are more important, aren't they? What are those?" Matsushita asked, speaking up on behalf of her classmates.

The exam format for the participants was essentially nothing more than a battle to see whether they could gain Private Points, while the representatives' exam would result in changes in Class Points, determining the brightness of that class's future. It was a very natural response, to prioritize a long-term perspective rather than short-term value. However, the examiner, someone that Matsushita and her classmates didn't usually come into contact with, responded in a detached, matter-of-fact tone.

"I have just told you everything you need to know. All you can do

is stick to your role and carry out the discussion properly. There is no point in trying to guess anything further. As for the representative's fight, those rules may change minutely from one discussion to the next. You will only know all of the answers once the special exam is over," replied the examiner.

He wasn't dodging the question; it was simply that the school never intended to tell them anything from the beginning. The students probably couldn't help but feel that was the will of this stubborn institution.

"So you mean to say that we won't even know how the exam works until it's over, then?" asked Shinohara.

"Precisely," replied the examiner.

Shinohara then voiced her complaints, indicating that she wasn't happy about this, but the examiner responded without a moment's pause. The examiner explained that the rules for the representatives had been thoroughly concealed and would not be revealed under any circumstances.

"Just keep in mind that if you do not engage with the discussion seriously, your class will gain nothing whatsoever," added the examiner.

While the participants were free to be as blatant as they'd like about their designated roles, there was no guarantee that doing so would be beneficial to their class's representatives. As long as it was unclear what exactly would determine the winners and losers, the option that would leave them with the fewest regrets would be to simply take the discussion seriously. Having made this clear, the examiner concluded the explanation.

5.1

AT 9:30 A.M., the students had finished listening to the explanation and headed over to the special building, where they were guided into a classroom set up specifically for discussion. There were many cameras mounted throughout the rooms to eliminate any blind spots. Fourteen desks and chairs, enough for two groups, were set up in

the room and arranged in a circle. A tablet was placed on each desk, and there were partitions between them to prevent peeking to either side.

The students confirmed their individual roles on their tablets when they entered the room. At the end of the round, the current status would be checked again, and then the students would begin the process of selecting options on their tablets. The model students had the right to eject anyone other than the other model student from the room at this time if the representative elected to pass, and each student that had any other position was required to exercise their various effects at this time. The backs of the chairs were marked with red tape or blue tape as simple identifying markers, with red being for Class B and blue being for Class D.

Even if students tried to congregate together with those that they were close friends with, the students seated to their right and left would inevitably be from the opposing class anyway, which made it impossible to even try whispering to one's fellow classmates. Also, a single large monitor was set up separately in the room, and important rules for the discussion were displayed on it.

Rules for Discussion

Students participating in the discussion should try to speak so that everyone can hear them.

The act of addressing a single specific person is prohibited.

Students who are found to have violated the above rules, such as by whispering in another student's ear, will be ordered to leave the room.

Excessively rough language, slander, and acts of violence will result in a penalty, and the student will be ordered to leave the room.

If a student is ejected from the room during the discussion, that student's respective class will be penalized.

The representative's Life Points will be reduced based on the severity of the penalty.

"The monitor will display the results of the discussion in progress and the final results," said the examiner.

At that moment, when the students' attention was focused, the

examiner changed what was displayed on the monitor and showed an example of what the end of a discussion might look like, with a sample of final results.

Final Results

Average students: 4

Model students: 0

Teachers: 0

Graduates: 0

Underclassmen: 1

Upperclassmen: 0

Traitors: 1

Please exit the room promptly to end the discussion and rotate to the next group.

Interval time remaining: 10:00

“This shows information about the results of individual roles. Once you have checked the information, please follow the instructions and exit the room,” said the examiner.

After telling the students this, the students were ordered to quickly leave the classroom and head over to the waiting room.

“The exam will begin shortly. Students who have been called to the waiting room should go there immediately,” said the examiner.

Once the hurried explanation was over, it was time for the participants’ battle to begin, with no time at all to chew on what they were told.

5.2

TEN O’CLOCK IN THE MORNING. The monitor in the waiting room meant for the participants lit up.

Discussion No. 1

Participants

Class 2-B

Sotomura Hideo, Makita Susumu, Minami Hakuo, Yukimura Teruhiko, Azuma Sana, Karuizawa Kei, Satou Maya

Class 2-D

Shibata Sou, Nakanishi Jirou, Moriyama Susumu, Andou Sayo, Yamagata Hina, Ishimaru Yuriko, Oonuki Nagisa

Students whose names are displayed should head to the discussion room.

“I-I’m up first. And so is Maya-chan...” said Karuizawa.

Having had her cell phone confiscated like everyone else, she had just been sitting there looking bored, but hurriedly got out of her seat. Satou, who was also determined to be part of the first group, rushed over to her side. While many of the students still hadn’t fully grasped the rules yet, they stepped out into the hallway and made their way to the discussion room. Yukimura was one of them, and Satou called out to her for advice.

“Hey, Yukimura-kun, what should we do?” asked Satou.

“Just follow the instructions. Besides, what class we’re in isn’t directly relevant to the discussion. If you, Karuizawa, and I were cast into the roles of average student and model student, then that would mean we’re enemies and allies,” Yukimura answered, coldly and bluntly. “That’s what this special exam is. The examiner said it before: The best thing to do is follow the rules and take things seriously.”

“Yeah, that’s true, but... It’s like, I guess I’m still not really understanding exactly how to do that,” said Satou.

Seeing Satou and Karuizawa fidgeting nervously next to him, Yukimura sighed internally. That was because he felt that such thinking, expressed as something particular to girls, was unpleasant to him. However, Yukimura was no longer thinking about things only in the self-centered way he did when he first entered school. Now, he spent time with Hasebe and Miyake whenever he could, and he had more

friendly interactions with other people.

“I think that probably it’s not just you two who are nervous and panicking, Satou, Karuizawa. I’m sure that people in the other class are feeling similarly. To start with, why not try to get used to the feel of the room? Besides, you’ve played games like Werewolf before, right?” asked Yukimura.

“I think I’ve played that one a couple times. So we can think of this as, like, the same kinda thing?” asked Karuizawa.

“I haven’t played it before. Is there a trick to it?” asked Satou.

“Let’s see... All right, if you’re selected to be a model student, then it’s a good idea not to carelessly look over at the other model student. This may surprise you, but it’s quite noticeable when people look at each other like that, and you’ll give yourself away,” said Yukimura.

Even though he wasn’t used to this sort of thing, giving out advice calmed Yukimura down somewhat; he naturally understood the magnitude of this End-of-Year Special Exam himself. Although he was frustrated by the highly secretive rules, like how the school wouldn’t even let them know how the exam was going as far as the representatives were concerned, he flipped a switch in his mind and just focused on doing his best as a participant.

“Oh, I get it. That makes sense. Yeah, I guess, like, eye contact and stuff would be important, huh?” replied Karuizawa.

Karuizawa somehow understood the gist of it, and began to explain to Satou that they should keep tricks like this in mind. Seeing that, Yukimura allowed himself to think everything would probably be all right for the time being.

“Will we...be safe?”

One person whispered those words in a quiet voice, so that no one else would hear. The fact that Yukimura helped two girls that he had nothing to do with calm down somehow came back as a benefit to him. Yukimura headed over to the discussion area as he mulled that over.

The door to the classroom opened and the fourteen students stepped inside. Karuizawa and Satou made eye contact, signaling to each other to sit as close together as possible, and they sat with Shibata from Class D between them. They both wanted to sit as close together as

possible, even if it wouldn't actually do them any good. The other students also sat down in the chairs assigned to their class, each taking whichever seats they liked from the assigned selection. There were those who preferred to sit closest to the door and those who preferred to sit furthest from the door. Shortly after all the participants were seated, they heard an announcement signaling the start of the discussion.

"The End-of-Year Special Exam will now commence. Each student's role is displayed on his or her tablet. Please check your assigned role before starting the first round of discussion."

All of the students looked down at the tablets placed on their desks. The monitor's screen temporarily switched over to show the number of students cast in their respective roles.

Average students: 8

Model students: 2

Teachers: 1

Graduates: 1

Underclassmen: 1

Upperclassmen: 1

As was explained to them in the rules, the students gathered here were assigned various roles. While everyone was hesitant to be the first to speak, it was none other than Yukimura Teruhiko of Class B who jumped right in.

"I'm just going to come right out and say it. I'd like to confirm whether or not Nakanishi is a model student," said Yukimura.

"Wait, what? Why me, right out of the gate?" Nakanishi asked. "Why would I be a model student?"

"I'm sorry, but it's just that you made eye contact first," said Yukimura.

Yukimura, who wanted to get things started, attacked by phrasing his statement thusly, precisely because he was an average student. He spoke up, leading the group, prepared for things to get rough by naming someone from another class. From there, the discussion began to ramp

up more and more.

5.3

OVER THE MONITOR, both Hirata and Hamaguchi continued watching the discussion for five minutes. The participants seemed to be feeling each other out as they conversed, but there was currently very little way to discern lie from truth. Although some students appeared suspicious here and there, confirming whether they were really model students was a separate matter.

With no idea how to tell what was what, representatives had essentially only two options. Either they could make the first move and go for victory, take the challenge of figuring out the assigned roles, and drive their opponent into a corner in one shot, or they could avoid risk by choosing to wait and see. At the very least, the two sitting here knew the dangers and weren't going to push ahead recklessly.

“Please nominate or pass, starting now. You have one minute.”

After that announcement came a few moments of brief silence. Accompanying the two representatives in the classroom at that time was a single adult. Not one of the second-year homeroom teachers that had provided the exam summary previously, but a new face they had never seen before. This adult stood completely silent in the corner of the classroom, monitoring the students' conversations and movements.

“Man, this exam sure is difficult, huh? I mean, it looks like not even you of all people get it right away, Hirata-kun,” said Hamaguchi, sounding like he was halfway between convinced and doubtful.

Hirata had the sort of personality that meant he didn't like to engage in political maneuvering, so he just nodded in sincere affirmation.

“Yeah, once you start looking for someone suspicious, everyone starts looking suspicious. It's not easy to make a decision in the first round, that's for sure,” said Hirata.

Just like the fourteen students who engaged in discussion, the two vanguards were feeling each other out in their conversation. One thing

that they had in common was that neither of them was good at telling the kinds of lies that would cause suffering, as they shared a strong abhorrence for such methods.

“...Okay.”

After taking a breath, Hamaguchi chose the option to pass on his tablet. Without a sure answer in mind, the risk was too high. That was precisely why he made his decision without hesitation and waited for Hirata's judgment call. As for Hirata, similarly, he couldn't take a risk at this point.

Among the fourteen participants, two were model students, the role that the representatives needed to detect. As for the other roles, teachers, graduates, underclassmen, and upperclassmen, there was one student in each of those roles. Which meant that to get a result from a nomination, he would simply need to hit six out of fourteen. That came out to a probability of approximately 42.9 percent. Some might not think those were bad odds, since there was a decent chance of getting it right.

In reality, however, the success rate was much lower than that, since the roles to be nominated were classified into five categories, excluding average students and traitors. With both sides having decided to pass, they would move on to the next step. This was when the effects of the roles held by the teachers and graduates, as well as any nominations made by model students participating in the discussion, would come into play. Because the participants would automatically be narrowed down to only to the specific roles that needed to use their tablets otherwise, the other participants with roles that did not have any special abilities also had a break at this time, engaging in a process in which they selected which participants they currently thought were suspicious on their tablets.

A model student had ordered Karuizawa to be removed from the room. The decision was made in an instant, and she quietly left the classroom before feelings of frustration could even well up within her. Now there were thirteen. As the odds were slowly but steadily beginning to change, the second round of discussion began. The two representatives stared intently at their monitors, becoming so silent that you couldn't even hear the sound of their breathing.

The discussion felt short but long at the same time. Participants regularly stumbled, unable to get their words out. Also, many of them

didn't know how to conduct themselves. Everyone was observing each other with distrust. Every little gesture, every action—everything looked suspicious.

At the end of the second round, the representatives had the right to nominate once again. Hamaguchi hoped against hope as he stared at his tablet, while occasionally stealing a sideways glance at Hirata, who was lost in thought. He was hoping that Hirata hadn't discovered anyone yet. His wish was half granted, as Hirata hadn't gained any new information even after the first round. Shortly afterward, Hirata looked over at Hamaguchi as well.

Their eyes met, and in the back of their minds, they each thought to themselves, "*What now?*" wondering how to keep the other in check. As the time limit approached, the two of them decided to go ahead with the same decision that they had made before, at the same time. Once again, they both decided that they couldn't take the risk, and chose to postpone a selection for now, and pass. Therefore, a nomination was made by a model student, and one student was ejected from the room.

That student's role was unknown, of course. Still, the number of participants was only the denominator that was steadily decreasing. That was inevitable. Hamaguchi leaned forward, ready for the next round, and grabbed hold of the monitor three times. The number of participants had decreased by two, but the main objective was to find the model student, who could take three Life Points away from their opponent. In that moment, while the denominator was decreasing, Hamaguchi wanted to think of a way to get the fight started properly, if he could.

The vanguards had a mere five Life Points. If you could find just one model student, you could therefore push your opponent to the edge in a single strike. Hamaguchi's plan to do just that started in the third round. Yukimura's comments, which had been relentlessly directed at Nakanishi, had upset Nakanishi more than Hamaguchi imagined they would, and the situation developed into a state of almost-panic as Nakanishi came under concentrated fire from those around him. Hamaguchi, as a fellow classmate of Nakanishi, was well aware that he wasn't normally the type to overact, and firmed up his resolve, deciding that it was time to go on the offensive and nominate him as a model student, even if it involved some level of risk.

Hirata, on the other hand, didn't feel the same way. To him,

Nakanishi's words and actions appeared unnatural, and he was getting the opposite impression from Hamaguchi's, that Nakanishi wasn't the model student. That said, at present, it was impossible to determine whether he held that or another position. Even though Hirata and Hamaguchi were looking at the same person, they had arrived at different conclusions.

Hamaguchi quickly entered his choice on his tablet and nominated Nakanishi as the model student. Meanwhile, Hirata chose to pass once again.

“Announcing the results. Hamaguchi-kun has identified Nakanishi-kun as the model student, so Hirata-kun loses three Life Points.”

Hamaguchi's nomination had been correct, and it was revealed that Nakanishi was indeed the model student.

“Ugh...”

Despite thinking they were both still on the defensive, Hirata suffered intense damage from Hamaguchi's attack. As for Hamaguchi, he was overcome with relief. Though he'd pulled off a big opening move, he felt that his nomination had been rather reckless. Hamaguchi had made his decision because of how flustered Nakanishi was acting, but there was a sufficiently high chance that he could've been cast into a role other than the model student, so it seemed like luck was on his side this round. The result made Hamaguchi happy but also anxious, and he braced himself once more for what lay ahead.

As a result of Hamaguchi's daring play, Hirata had suddenly lost three Life Points and was now down to two. This was a big change in the situation, where both participants had been trying to get a feel for the other, moving things along with only a few words. Only one model student remained. Hirata was forced into a situation where he had to find a particular student, in the worst possible scenario. The severity of the situation weighed on him as the fourth round began.

Hirata realized how much having the other side take the initiative would weigh on you in this special exam. Thus far, in the previous three rounds, Hirata had repeatedly passed his turn without too much worry, but now he had been driven to a point where he could no longer make his choices so carelessly. He hoped that, somehow, the discussion would progress and give him a big clue. Though he had wished for that in his impatience, the discussion wasn't progressing as he would've liked.

After it had been made clear that Nakanishi was the model student and he was removed from the discussion, the sole remaining model student went even further into hiding, concealing their identity. That was precisely why it was the students cast into the other roles who were the ones Hirata wanted to rely on.

“Let’s not have any hard feelings between us, okay, Hirata-kun?” said Hamaguchi.

“Yes. Of course, I agree,” answered Hirata.

The discussion was moving ahead, albeit sluggishly. Just then, when it was about time people felt like that it wouldn’t be unusual for new information to come out, about two minutes into the fourth round, Yukimura finally came forward and said that he held the role of graduate. Yukimura, having checked out what everyone’s roles were three times now, reported that everyone he had checked thus far had been average students, and he hadn’t yet determined who the model student was. However, this was good news for Hirata, a silver lining on a dark cloud.

Hirata could cut down Hamaguchi’s Life Points if he nominated Yukimura and identified his role, now that he had come forward. Of course, Hamaguchi would probably nominate Yukimura as a graduate as well, but in that case, they would cancel each other out. It was possible that the match between them could be settled in the fifth round, coming up next. With his back against the wall, Hirata immediately nominated Yukimura as a graduate as soon as the discussion ended. However...

“Both Hamaguchi-kun and Hirata-kun have nominated erroneously and lose one Life Point.”

Yukimura was ejected from the room, making it clear that he had not been cast into the role of graduate after all. Yukimura was only pretending to be the graduate in order to push through the stalemate in the discussion so that he could find the model student. A false role, which Hirata might have figured out if he had been watching Yukimura more carefully. However, Hirata had been too flustered and impatient to make a calm decision and was convinced that Yukimura was the graduate who could identify the model student.

Hirata was saved by the fact that Hamaguchi got caught up in it too, but even so, their Life Points were now four to one. Hirata had ended up being pushed all the way to the edge. Shortly after the

discussion began, Hirata was feeling somewhat flippant, unable to sense the weighty significance of this End-of-Year Special Exam. But it was here, in this moment, that the pressure made itself known all at once. The battle between representatives, which began with these two cautious vanguards, had turned into a wait-and-see situation for both sides.

The participants, now suspicious to the point of hypervigilance over the fact that Yukimura was not a graduate, all went quiet in unison. With no new information coming out, they chose to put things on hold. As a result, when it came time for the representatives to exercise their right to nominate, both decided to pass. The remaining model student made nominations one after another, forcing Oonuki, Makita, and Azuma to leave the room. Without meeting the conditions to bring the discussion to an end, the participants suddenly realized there were only six of them left. The discussion proceeded into the eighth round.

Then...

“Because Hirata-kun has nominated erroneously, he will lose one Life Point. Since Hirata-kun’s Life Points have been depleted, we ask that he please leave the room at this time.”

A cold, mechanical announcement unceremoniously came over the speakers. The discussion had reached a dead end, and the participants were getting flustered and impatient with the lack of progress, so Hirata decided to try something, but his attempt had ended in failure. Hamaguchi, whose nomination of Nakanishi was successful thanks to luck, and who chose to pass again in this round, was the winner.

5.4

THE SHOWDOWN BETWEEN the representatives was structured in such a way that their conversations were not revealed publicly, so the students participating in the discussion were naturally in a similar state of mind as the center and general representatives waiting on standby. In fact, if anything, considering the fact that their cue to take their turn

came unexpectedly, it could be said that the strain on the students, mentally and physically, was even greater.

The waiting room had fallen completely silent. The only information being disclosed was the decrease in Life Points between the representatives as they fought. As Horikita stared intently at the monitor, the notation on the screen started to change. Immediately afterward, an announcement began to play in the room where the other representatives were waiting.

“Hirata-kun is leaving the room as a result of Hamaguchi-kun’s victory. Center, please prepare for your turn.”

A classmate’s defeat, which Horikita hadn’t wanted to face if at all possible. After hearing the announcement telling her as much, she let out a small sigh.

“Off I go,” said Horikita brusquely to Ayanokouji, who had been sitting next to her.

“Hope you put up a good fight,” replied Ayanokouji.

To Horikita, it sounded like he didn’t care whatsoever, like this wasn’t his problem. But she didn’t let herself get irritated. That was because she had learned quite well over the past two years that Ayanokouji was just that kind of person. She felt that, while his words might sound cold, he contributed to the class in his own way—and he would likely do so in this special exam as well. He’d asked for something in return, yes, but as the general, he had taken on the task of leading the class to victory. That was precisely why Horikita could take on this battle with all of her might, without hesitation. Above all else, the person sitting next to her was dependable. Even if, hypothetically, she was to lose against her opponent Hamaguchi, she was sure that Ayanokouji would be able to defeat all of the other class’s representatives, all the way through Ichinose. However, that was baseless intuition, and she reminded herself once again that she couldn’t let those unfounded feelings get the better of her.

Horikita left the waiting room and made her way over to the classroom where the exam was being held. On the way, she ran into Hirata, who had left the room.

“I’m sorry, Horikita-san... I wasn’t any help at all...” said Hirata.

“I can guess what the situation is, more or less. You don’t need to be discouraged,” said Horikita.

Everyone had things that they were and were not suited for—the two of them were simply cut out for different things. Hirata was a student who was able to observe those around him quite well, but he was most definitely not the type who was suited for this type of exam, where one had to be suspicious of others. Horikita understood this well.

There was a ten-minute interval. The school would have likely assumed that the students from the losing class would pass by each other when they switched places. If that was the case, then that meant that there wasn't a problem to trade opinions, as long as time permitted.

"Was there anything you noticed?" asked Horikita.

"Let's see... Well, we can't control the content of the discussion, but I think maybe the timing of when the representatives attack, whether you go first or second, likely makes a significant difference in determining the outcome," said Hirata.

Horikita listened intently as Hirata recounted the events he experienced.

"I suppose that means the situation can change all of a sudden then, depending on the participants," replied Horikita.

It was certainly true that there was nothing they could do if the conversation progressed to a point where they couldn't control it. However, Horikita believed that it wasn't necessarily impossible to deal with any possible situation, regardless.

"Thank you. Take it easy and rest," said Horikita.

After nonchalantly watching Hirata's back as he returned to the waiting room, Horikita also turned and headed toward her destination. After she arrived at the classroom where Hamaguchi was waiting, she placed her hand on the door.

"Ahem."

She lightly cleared her throat and then briefly removed her hand. Once she opened it, there was no turning back. She took a deep breath and emptied her mind for a moment. Then, she drew out the information that she had organized in her mind and slowly opened the door.

Chapter 6: Katsuragi's Counterattack

AROUND THE TIME that Hirata and Hamaguchi's battle was about to begin, another battle between representatives was also about to start. The two representatives were staring intently at the participants who had entered the discussion room.

Discussion No. 1

Participants

Class 2-A

Shimizu Naoki, Machida Kouji, Yoshida Kenta, Fukuyama Shinobu, Motodoi Chikako, Yano Koharu

Class 2-C

Sonoda Masashi, Oda Takumi, Yamada Albert, Yoshimoto Kousetsu, Isoyama Nagisa, Yamashita Saki, Kinoshita Minori

It was Class A vs. Class C, with Nishino and Sanada going up against each other as vanguards for their respective classes.

"Hello. Let us both give our best efforts, Nishino-san," said Sanada.

Once the two of them were all alone in the classroom, Sanada, feeling slightly nervous, greeted Nishino politely and took his seat first. Sanada, who always endeavored to maintain a polite manner of speaking even when engaging with fellow classmates in his same grade level, showed no change in his usual demeanor even in the face of his enemy. Nishino, however, didn't look very kindly upon Sanada's type. By her own admission, she acknowledged that she had a coarse, ill-mannered personality, she wasn't fond of speaking in polite expressions, and she primarily spoke informally. That was why she assumed that she wasn't very compatible with people who used such formal, almost ceremonious language.

However, insignificant feelings of like or dislike were nowhere to

be found right now. Rather, she was instead feeling incredibly nervous over being entrusted with the responsibility of acting as vanguard for such a major event, and her body went rigid. Even someone like Nishino, who wasn't afraid to deal with hooligans like Ryuuen, wasn't accustomed to the atmosphere of these serious exams at all. Though her role was called vanguard, she was playing a part in the class competition.

Nishino couldn't help but feel the intense pressure. A representative who thought that this whole thing had nothing to do with her, she was handpicked by Ryuuen out of the entire class, without any warning. She bitterly regretted her decision to simply accept his selection without giving it more consideration. It was clear from the way that she stood there stock still, forgetting even to sit down in the chair, that she wasn't in her normal state of mind.

Sanada felt a little bewildered, wondering if he should offer her a helping hand.

“Nishi—”

Just as he started to call out her name, Sanada suddenly cut himself off. He reminded himself that such careless kindness on his part could come back to haunt him. If his adversary was feeling overwhelmed here, then his only real option was to make use of that. Sanada quietly took deep breaths, suppressing his feelings of guilt. When Nishino finally sat down in her chair, the exam began, as though it had been waiting on her.

“The discussion will now commence.”

Along with that announcement, audio could be heard coming from the monitor.

“The End-of-Year Special Exam will now commence. Each student's role is displayed on his or her tablet. Please check your assigned role before starting the first round of discussion.”

On the other side of the cold, sterile monitors that were set up in the room, the participants had taken their seats. Then, the discussion began with no time to even compose themselves. The tense Nishino, who hadn't relaxed in the slightest and whose vision had narrowed, continued to stare intently at the monitor without even once checking on how Sanada was doing.

“U-um... So I guess everyone's already confirmed their roles

already...?” wondered Nishino, aloud.

Nishino couldn't recall what had just happened in the room prior to the moment when the participants were confirming their assigned roles. It felt like the discussion had begun before she had even realized it, causing her to panic a little. However, the video playing out in front of her eyes was proceeding in real time and couldn't be paused or rewound. The hectic, rapid conversation from the participants reached Nishino's ears, regardless of whether she wanted to hear it. From the right to the left. She couldn't keep track of the conversation in her head and couldn't even understand the contents of the conversation whatsoever.

“Please nominate or pass, starting now. You have one minute.”

“Huh? Wait, has, uh, five minutes passed already...?” stammered Nishino.

The signal for the end of the first round had been given without Nishino managing to make heads or tails of anything that was going on. As a conditioned reflex, Nishino hurriedly looked down at her tablet in a panic. On the screen were the names of the fourteen participants, displayed together neatly. Normally, if you didn't understand what was going on, one would expect that it'd make sense to pass that turn. However, Nishino continued to look at the names of the students, her thoughts a confused mess.

The nomination time limit ticked away without stopping. Then, once her eyes focused on Yoshida's name, she recalled the discussion earlier. She could hardly remember anything, but she had the feeling that there was something suspicious, somehow. It was a vague memory, but it flashed through her mind with unusual clarity. Though she wasn't sure whether it was true or not, the way Yoshida had been acting and the things she said seemed to be telling Nishino that she was the model student. Though Nishino felt like she was in a daze and about to faint, she managed to use her tablet. Somehow, she entered her choice on the tablet before the time limit was reached, but then...

“Because Nishino-san has nominated erroneously, she will lose one Life Point.”

It was a reckless, impulsive move, to suddenly nominate someone as the model student. As a result, she lost one Life Point. Sanada, watching Nishino silently, had calmly avoided the option of nominating, counter to Nishino's example.

“They weren’t the model student... Huh. I don’t get this at all...” murmured Nishino.

Perhaps it was from feeling flustered, but Nishino spoke to herself loudly, her words even reaching Sanada’s ears. Because the teacher used their power and succeeded in blocking the nomination from the model student, only one student was removed from the room this round. With the number of participants reduced to thirteen, the second round of discussion began, but Nishino’s mental state had remained essentially unchanged, and she showed no signs of improvement, letting the time pass in vain.

Nishino, not knowing what to do, pulled her eyes away from the monitor and tablet for the first time, and looked over at Sanada. Up until now, she had only looked back and forth between the monitor and her tablet. Sanada noticed Nishino’s gaze but pretended not to and, while acting as though he were about to make a nomination, chose to pass once again. Sanada wasn’t good at acting by any means, but it was effective enough on Nishino right now. As if to demonstrate proof of this, Nishino once again pushed ahead with an unsubstantiated nomination.

“Because Nishino-san has nominated erroneously, she will lose two Life Points.”

Nishino had once again misidentified the role. The sequence of events was exactly the same as the first round, which just made the wound even deeper. Fukuyama, after being nominated, was ejected from the room. After this round, Nishino had lost a total of three Life Points and was now pushed into a position where she could be unceremoniously defeated all too easily if Sanada correctly nominated any specific role, not just the model student.

Sanada decided that he should continue to fight mainly by passing, based on the consideration of the possibility that Nishino would self-destruct and defeat herself. However, once they entered the third round, Nishino had already lost most of her courage to nominate anyone. For that reason, both representatives decided to pass, and Isoyama was ejected from the room after being nominated by the model student.

Sanada, who had been watching the participants’ discussion intently thus far, noticed that Nishino’s gaze on the monitor screen was focused only on the participants from Class A, her rival class. She was

unable to see the whole picture, held captive by the absolute that was “Class A vs. Class C.” However, Sanada realized that it was also important to consider class alignments and loyalties separately, and he deliberately discarded the idea of focusing his attention on the students from Class C. If Nishino was only looking at Class A, then Sanada would have an overwhelming advantage, since he knew those students better.

Then came the fourth round. There was a major development in the discussion when Shimizu, who came forward and self-identified as the graduate, declared that Kinoshita was not the model student. However, at that moment, Yoshimoto came forward and claimed to be the real graduate, and that Kinoshita was the model student. At this point, one or both of them had to be lying.

The time had come for the representatives to make their nominations once again. Here, Sanada chose to pass for a fourth time, using almost all of the time available to him, just barely squeezing it in before the time limit was up. That was because while he was tempted to make a nomination, he hadn’t yet come to a solid decision.

As for Nishino, who had her back against the wall, some valuable information had finally come her way. She didn’t want to let it go to waste. If Sanada had discovered what the roles were, there was a strong possibility that she would lose. Still, she had no choice but to push ahead and make a nomination, even if it were risky. Nishino figured it was fine to declare that Shimizu was the graduate, since she had come forward first and said as much, but she chose to keep her evaluation of the position to herself, just in case. And the results showed that...

“Because Nishino-san has nominated erroneously, she will lose two Life Points.”

Shimizu, who had proclaimed to be the graduate, was actually the model student. In believing her, Nishino had ended up majorly self-destructing. Sanada, on the other hand, had succeeded in defeating Nishino, the opposing vanguard, without losing a single Life Point.

“Since Nishino-san’s Life Points have been depleted, we ask that she please leave the room at this time.”

“What the hell?! I don’t get this at all!” snapped Nishino.

Though she was irritated with herself over what happened in this exam, Nishino was ordered to leave the room before her frustration could set in.

“Phew... I’m glad that my opponent was Nishino-san...” said Sanada. In the end, he had won just by passing, without ever having to make a nomination. *“At any rate, I think that the best way for me to win is to take it nice and slow.”*

After watching several discussions, he realized that it wasn’t easy to detect truth and lies over the monitor. While Sanada readied his mind, so that he could deal with the next opponent calmly, he waited in the same room for the next battle to come. During the interval, however, Sanada began to find himself assailed by mixed feelings. He couldn’t wholeheartedly be happy over the fact that he had won a complete victory over Nishino. It had been two years since he had come to this school, but he still honestly couldn’t get used to the idea of winning. Light and shadow. On the other side of it, there was always a loser. Sanada had never been good at directly confronting that reality.

“No, this won’t do. I need to...put in my best effort, for the sake of the class,” said Sanada.

After another five minutes or so, the center from Ryuen’s class set foot inside the classroom. Sanada, shaking off his feelings of gloom, stood up and smiled at this new arrival.

“Katsuragi-kun, hello. Let us both give this our best effort,” said Sanada, addressing Katsuragi with the same polite manner that he’d used with Nishino. *“It’s been quite a while since the two of us have spoken like this.”*

“Yes. I suppose it has been a long time since we last spoke,” replied Katsuragi.

The two of them faced each other. When they were together in Class A and learning in the same classroom, they weren’t particularly close friends, but they weren’t at odds with each other either. They were just ordinary classmates, so to speak.

“When I heard the rules for this special examination, I thought for sure that you would be a representative,” said Sanada.

Katsuragi stopped walking once he heard those words, and, looking at Sanada’s facial expression, he sensed his intentions.

“It would seem you defeated Nishino with ease,” said Katsuragi.

“I don’t know if I’d say ‘with ease,’ really,” Sanada replied. *“I didn’t do anything in particular. It seemed more like she was simply*

overwhelmed by the exam is all. I would like to ask you one question before the discussion begins, though. Why was Nishino-san chosen as a representative? I thought that surely there are some students a little better suited for the role in your class, Katsuragi-kun. Oh, Nishino-san did try very hard, of course, and I'm sure that she has many good points, but..."

Sanada tried to emphasize the fact that he certainly didn't think less of Nishino by any means, but he still had doubts, thinking that there were others who were more suitable. He had considered the possibility that she had been a substitute representative, but since there wasn't a single student absent from Ryuuen's class, he'd dismissed that idea.

"Well, now. Even if you ask me, I cannot answer your question. It was Ryuuen who chose the representatives," said Katsuragi.

"I see. So, I suppose that means if I defeat you, Katsuragi-kun, then I will be able to hear the answer," said Sanada.

"It does indeed," replied Katsuragi, walking to his seat and slowly sitting down. "However, you should know that it won't be easy. Just as you want to ask Ryuuen why he appointed Nishino, I have business with Sakayanagi above you."

It was a clear declaration that he intended to defeat Sanada, as well as Kitou, who was next in line after him.

"Please go easy on me," said Sanada, humbly.

From that point on, there was no more private talk between the two representatives whatsoever, and the room was silent as they waited for the signal for the discussion to begin.

Discussion No. 1

Participants

Class 2-A

Satonaka Satoru, Tsukasaki Taiga, Sugio Hiroshi, Morishige Takurou, Tanihara Mao, Tsukaji Shihori, Yamamura Miki

Class 2-C

Ibuki Mio, Inoue Toa, Okabe Fuyu, Suzuhira Miu, Morofuji Rika, Yajima Mariko, Yuube Yoshika

“Please begin the first round of discussion.”

When the representatives had prepared themselves, a voice over the monitor broke the silence, announcing the start of the discussion. Both representatives stared silently at the multiple monitors, listening intently to the discussion among the fourteen participants captured from various angles.

All of the participants were different from those who had been there previously, and these new participants were discussing for the first time. In other words, the situation was exactly the same as in the first discussion, with the proceedings going awkwardly, with everyone fumbling to say something. For that reason especially, it wasn't easy to determine who was assigned what role.

Five intense minutes of diversionary tactics, shows of force, and sounding each other out. There were particularly few clues to be gleaned in the first round of discussion, but even so, the representatives watched intently, reluctant to even blink. Sanada had focused only on the students from his own class in the second half of his battle with Nishino earlier, but this time, he chose to go back to the basics and observe the whole group. The long-yet-short discussion period ended, and the representative's time had come.

“Please nominate or pass, starting now. You have one minute.”

Their first nomination. As long as no explicitly blatant information was revealed, Sanada had decided to stick with the same strategy he had used when he had completely shut out Nishino. If he rushed to make a nomination carelessly, there was a good chance that he would self-destruct and lose points, just like Nishino. Sanada remained unscathed, with five Life Points.

While vanguards had less leeway than centers, he still had a good number of Life Points left, which was a significant factor. Even in the unlikely event that Katsuragi were to correctly identify the model student, Sanada would still have two points left. With that much, he would at least have a chance to counterattack against his opponent. However, even so, he wasn't going to hurriedly enter his choice to pass.

He decided to take his time and think things over, to give the impression that was going to make a nomination. On the other hand, although it was his first battle, Katsuragi stared intently at Sanada,

without making any attempt to hide his gaze.

“You have an advantage because you experienced the exam first, don’t you?” asked Katsuragi.

“I’m not sure. But I think there must have been some information that could have been gleaned from the discussion we just observed,” said Sanada.

With his response, Sanada tried to make a show of indicating that he had taken a few clues into his decision. However, perhaps the fact he was unaccustomed to acting was his undoing, as Katsuragi’s only response was to narrow his eyes. He seemed to notice Sanada’s attitude, what he was thinking, and what kind of strategy he was using. Neither of them had entered their choices on their tablets, and the clock was ticking.

“Are you agonizing over the decision of whether to nominate someone or not?” asked Katsuragi, pointing out that Sanada’s fingertips weren’t moving across his tablet’s screen.

“I suppose so. There are some participants that I have thoughts about, and I was wondering if I might simply take the plunge and make a nomination,” said Sanada.

Sanada was going to use as much time as he possibly could and continue to act the part of a student considering making a nomination. He was hoping that would provoke Katsuragi, make him flustered, and get him to rush to make a nomination of his own.

“Have you decided what you are going to do, Katsuragi-kun?” asked Sanada.

“I cannot answer that. But I’m sure you understand what to do better than I do, since you fought Nishino before me. I’m sure you can nominate without hesitation,” said Katsuragi.

Katsuragi urged Sanada to go ahead and make the nomination, in a special exam where if someone got a preemptive hit on their opponent, it would make things more difficult. Did he still not understand the essence of this special exam, or did he understand it and make that statement anyway? Sanada thought about it, but once the time limit approached, he relaxed his shoulders.

“No, I think that I will refrain. It seems like it would be difficult to narrow things down now, at the very least,” said Sanada.

Moments after Sanada entered 'pass' on his tablet, Katsuragi had finished making his choice as well. Sanada nodded internally at his decision, telling himself that he shouldn't panic, and just enter his choice in the second round or later. However...

"I see. In that case, I suppose I will not hesitate," said Katsuragi.

"Huh?" said Sanada, blinking.

"Announcing the results. Katsuragi-kun identified Morishige-kun as a position holder, so Sanada-kun loses one Life Point."

Sanada had expected Katsuragi to be on the defensive, but he pressed ahead and made a nomination in the first round and succeeded. An announcement was made, and Sanada lost one Life Point before the second round.

"How...did you know?" asked Sanada.

"Actually, I should be asking you, how did you not, Sanada?" Katsuragi replied. "Morishige is a student in your class."

Katsuragi, as he stared at the monitor, had focused his attention for the first five minutes not on the students from his class, but only on the students from Sakayanagi's. Sanada knew very few of the students from Ryuen's class, and it was difficult to detect a student's quirks and habits in a span of five minutes. Sanada had broadened his perspective, as he believed that looking at the whole group at first was surely the correct move to make.

"There were some students who seemed suspicious among the participants, but you didn't seem to notice," remarked Katsuragi.

Katsuragi was doing the same thing that Nishino did, but they were wildly different in terms of precision.

"...You discarded half of your field of vision?" asked Sanada.

"The people that I had chosen to participate in the discussion group are the students who can act reasonably well. I assumed that they would not do something that would give themselves away so blatantly within the first five minutes. That does not, however, appear to be the case for you. Did you fail to notice the look on Morishige's face, which indicated that he had been given a special role?" replied Katsuragi.

In truth, Morishige had been restless from the moment he entered the room. He didn't make eye contact with anyone in particular, and only raised the corners of his mouth from time to time. Katsuragi, who

had only been focusing on the participants from Class A, didn't fail to notice how Morishige looked as he scrutinized the students to determine their roles. Of course, there were no actual guarantees, and it was impossible for Katsuragi to have narrowed it down to what role Morishige was in, exactly. However, Katsuragi prioritized the importance of reducing his opponent's Life Points in his first move and decided to nominate Morishige as a position holder.

"You certainly did very well to pull one over on me. But I will not allow it to happen again," said Sanada.

Sanada, steeling himself once more and regaining his composure, stared intently at the monitor before the second round began. However, his mind was in turmoil, and he hadn't yet decided where he ought to be looking. Should he look only at Class A, like Katsuragi had done? Or should he focus on Class C, precisely because he had so little information? Or should he carefully observe the entire group like he had before? Before he could settle on a course of action, the five-minute discussion period started once again.

"I can more or less predict what your tactics were, from the time it took for Nishino to lose, and from the fact that you had completely shut her out. I would say that, in all likelihood, you didn't make a single nomination, and the match-up ended with Nishino self-destructing, correct?" asked Katsuragi.

Sanada could only respond with a wry, bitter smile at Katsuragi sharply describing what had happened. And although he tried to concentrate on the discussion currently happening, miscellaneous thoughts had inevitably come pouring in. Then, five minutes had passed.

"Please nominate or pass, starting now. You have one minute."

"I will pass," announced Katsuragi.

As soon as the announcement was made, Katsuragi deliberately made a public statement, and finished using his tablet in an instant. Sanada pondered whether he could trust Katsuragi's statement.

"I'm being forced into a difficult decision here," he remarked.

No new information had emerged clearly from the discussion, though there were some students that Sanada found slightly curious. It was hard to imagine that Katsuragi had failed to notice the same things he had. Considering Katsuragi's initial determination, Sanada figured

there was a possibility that he might nominate a student as a position holder again. In other words, Sanada couldn't dismiss the possibility of lying.

He stared at the tablet.

Sanada knew that being the first one to lose points was unexpectedly damaging, mentally. In that case, he figured that he should go ahead and attack, even if it meant taking on some degree of risk—that was his mindset now. The person who nominated would only lose one or two Life Points, no matter the worst-case scenario a nomination resulted in.

"If you are pulling back this time, Katsuragi-kun, then... I suppose I will make a move," said Sanada.

With that, Sanada decided to go on the offensive and nominate someone, just as Katsuragi had done in the first round. The number of participants had been reduced to twelve. One participant with a position had most definitely been removed from the pool, but even so, there was a good chance he could be successful. Now all that was left was to decide whether to go for the model student, or to play it safe and nominate someone as position holder. Or, perhaps, he could attack by aiming for a specified role.

Sanada wanted to get the model student and reduce his opponent's Life Points by three, so that he could level the playing field. Class 2-C, Morofuji Rika, model student, confirm. Sonoda tapped his choices on his tablet, followed by the confirmation button. After the data was transmitted, there was a brief moment of silence before the decision was made. And then...

"Because Sanada-kun has nominated erroneously, he will lose two Life Points."

"Ugh... Guess I was wrong," sighed Sanada.

The cruel results showed that his effort had been in vain. Morofuji left the room, seeming exasperated. The results were unfortunate because Sanada *had* been correct in his thinking that Morofuji was assigned to a specific role. He now had only two Life Points left.

"That is rather unlike you, Sanada, to go ahead with uncertain information," commented Katsuragi, speaking as though he and Sanada were still classmates.

“It was because I found Morofuji-san’s behavior to be a little suspicious, I suppose,” said Sanada.

“That might be true. But how much do you know about Morofuji? Perhaps you don’t really know anything about her, do you? You ought to think very carefully about where the behavior is coming from. If Morofuji was the model student, that means that she has an ally. One or two people would have made a significant difference in Morofuji’s state of mind. If it were me in your position, I would have nominated as position holder, if I attacked,” said Katsuragi.

Sanada, while listening to Katsuragi’s comments that bordered instructions, somehow managed to suppress his disarrayed thoughts. It certainly wasn’t a minor mistake, to be sure, but Sanada hadn’t run out of points yet. A successful nomination in the next round would be enough to inflict a serious blow on his opponent. However...

The match continued into the third round. Two girls, Inoue and Tanihara, started arguing back and forth with each other, asserting that the other was the model student, based on substantiated comments. They simply quarreled back and forth, arguing which one of them was suspicious and which one wasn’t. From there, the discussions increasingly veered irrelevant topics. Suddenly, the conversation had gotten all over the place, but there was no rule against getting off topic, and the school wasn’t going to interrupt the discussion unless there was a violation of the stipulated rules.

Sanada couldn’t act recklessly here, and he reluctantly chose to pass in the third round. Katsuragi, on the other hand, deliberately chose to nominate Tsukaji rather than the two students who had stuck out in the discussion. But his attempt was a swing and a miss, and so his Life Points dropped from seven to six. Afterward, although it seemed likely that either Inoue or Tanihara would be nominated by the model student and disappear, it turned out to be neither of them. Rather, it was Satonaka who was ordered to leave the room.

Round four ended with the conversation mostly having been between Inoue and Tanihara. Then, once more, someone other than those two was selected by the model student to leave the room: Okabe. Now, seven students remained. But since little progress had been made in the discussion, it was unclear what the representatives could even do. If a representative nominated a participant as a position holder, they would know whether that participant had a position or not, but if the

student ejected from the room by the model student was an average student or in any other position, that information wouldn't be disclosed. In other words, it was impossible to determine how many position holders currently remained in the room.

Sanada wanted to win here, but now the situation was such that a single mistake would weigh heavily on him. He wanted to see how things looked after one more round; he figured that then, he might be able to narrow it down. Sanada was certain of it, even more than he was in the previous round, and he was sure that Katsuragi was on the same page. He imagined such a convenient development without really thinking it through.

He was overcome by the feeling of wanting to pass. Spurred on by this emotion, he tapped the pass icon displayed on the screen and made his selection. Then, the final confirmation screen appeared, and he was presented with two choices.

"It would appear that you have chosen to pass. In that case, I believe I will go ahead and attack," said Katsuragi.

Just then, when one more tap on the touchscreen would have confirmed his selection to pass, Katsuragi's words made his fingers stop. A report made preemptively, out of the mistaken belief that Sanada had completed entering his choice to pass. Now that Katsuragi was making a move, Sanada might not have any more turns to attack if Katsuragi gave a correct answer. Sanada hurriedly canceled the choice he made before, backing out of the confirmation screen, tapped the name of the student he had been thinking of as a possibility, and then simply entered "as position holder" and confirmed his selection.

"Because Sanada-kun has nominated erroneously, he will lose two Life Points. Now that Sanada-kun's Life Points have been depleted, we ask that he please leave the room at this time."

An announcement was made, and Sanada suddenly saw the discrepancy between Katsuragi's statement and the results.

"The model student... It backfired again? But, Katsuragi-kun, what about your nomination? Was it right or wrong?" asked Sanada.

"You thought you were making a wise choice, but it would appear that you got swept up in the moment, Sanada," said Katsuragi.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Sanada.

“I mean that I chose to pass this time,” replied Katsuragi.

“Huh?” blinked Sanada.

“I lied,” said Katsuragi. “I figured that you would rather attack than be attacked, after all. It would appear that you failed to see through me.”

“I see... I didn’t even notice that much, huh,” replied Sanada.

Sanada’s response was totally lifeless. Just then, he realized that his heart had been pounding the entire time. He didn’t notice in that first round because Nishino was even more nervous than he was, but he was quite anxious himself. Sanada had been hoping to cut down Katsuragi’s life bar as much as possible, even if that was only a little bit, and win if there was a chance. But Katsuragi had been firm in his resolve and precise in his decision making, letting nothing go to waste, and he had the courage to throw down the gauntlet from the start.

Sanada, having felt like he was surpassed in every way, could do nothing, and lost in front of Katsuragi. He left the room. After watching Sanada exit so that his new opponent could come in, Katsuragi took a moment to catch his breath.

“I’ve lost one Life Point. No problem. I just need to keep pressing ahead calmly like I have been, and it will be fine.”

Katsuragi, arms crossed, suppressed his feeling of wanting to rejoice. Before even considering such proud, lofty ideas as revenge, he needed to defeat the opposing center, after all. Only after he dragged out Sakayanagi, the general, could he let his emotions run as high as he liked.

6.1

KITOU, AFTER QUIETLY and smoothly striding into the room, glared sharply at Katsuragi and took his seat. The battle between centers seemed like it was going to get off to a quiet start, with neither side offering a single word to the other. However, the situation began to change in an instant. Immediately after the first round ended, Katsuragi made the choice to pass, but Kitou didn’t hesitate in nominating

someone. Without any clues, he took a gamble in going for one of the two model students, who were mixed in among the fourteen participants.

“Because Kitou-kun has nominated erroneously, he will lose one Life Point.”

Kitou lightly clicked his tongue at the announcement, but his facial expression didn't darken. The probability of success was approximately 14.3 percent. He had taken a high level of risk to try to snatch away some of Katsuragi's Life Points. Kitou didn't lose his composure precisely because he had already factored in the possibility that he might be mistaken.

“That is rather like you, Kitou, to be so terribly drastic. However, what will you do next time?” asked Katsuragi.

“It should be obvious,” replied Kitou. “I only have to push forward...”

Kitou had lost a point in the blink of an eye, but true to his word, Kitou confidently forged ahead and nominated someone as the model student in the second round as well.

“Because Kitou-kun has nominated erroneously, he will lose two Life Points.”

That attempt had also ended fruitlessly. Furthermore, because the student had been either a teacher or a graduate, Kitou lost two points. Even Katsuragi gasped slightly at the outrageous consecutive blows that Kitou suffered.

“Now you have only four Life Points left. Even so, do you still plan to continue nominating recklessly?” asked Katsuragi.

“Of course,” replied Kitou.

“The content of this special exam is clearly not your strong suit. I'm sure that this must displease you. The choices available to us are naturally limited, but I never imagined you would try something like a suicide mission. Did you get Sakayanagi's permission to be a representative? Or did she order you, perhaps?” asked Katsuragi.

Kitou deliberately chose not to respond, since his strategy was precisely what Katsuragi had just described. Namely, that if Kitou got even one successful nomination, that would be satisfactory, and Sakayanagi herself had accepted this. Since Kitou had volunteered to be

a representative, he was expected to deliver results, no matter how bad he was at this sort of thing.

While the probability of success per nomination wasn't remarkably high, even if Kitou struck out, he would only lose one or two points. Therefore, what Kitou could do right now was make as many attempts as he could before his opponent could move to nominate. Of course, despite the fact that Kitou had decided his plan of attack from the very beginning, he'd be angry if things didn't go as planned. Kitou's irritation showed in how forcefully he stabbed his finger on the tablet on his deck, practically attacking it.

Katsuragi ignored his savage neighbor and continued focusing his attention solely on the monitor in pursuit of his deductions. Kitou, on the other hand, paid little attention to the conversations, letting them go in one ear and out the other, and hardly did any sleuthing. He looked only at the human emotions displayed by the students and looked only at the students who reacted in ways that seemed appropriate. Once again, in round three, Kitou made an erroneous nomination and lost one Life Point. That left him with three Life Points.

He continued to lose Life Points by his own self-destruction. Round four followed. Once again, Kitou, undaunted, only went after nominating the model student. For his part, Katsuragi had once again considered passing, but then decided against it. Kitou had missed three nominations thus far, but as the denominator decreased, the probability of success gradually increased. This time in particular, there was a 25 percent chance that he would guess correctly.

Katsuragi, having grasped the trend for the three students Kitou had nominated in the past, considered whether any of the remaining students who fit that trend could be narrowed down as possible candidates for the model student, and he found one student fit the criteria. Even if Kitou pushed ahead and nominated that candidate, Katsuragi should be able to make it a draw if he nominated that same person. And even if Katsuragi missed, he could get away with losing one or two points. He considered the issue from various angles. While normally, Katsuragi would have preferred to wait and see after one more round, he found himself too greedy to take hold of victory to wait, and threw down the gauntlet. And the results were...

"Announcing the results. Katsuragi-kun identified Yamawaki-kun as a position holder, so Kitou-kun loses three Life Points. Now that Kitou-kun's

Life Points have been depleted, we ask that he please leave the room at this time."

Kitou, a center with seven Life Points, was eliminated in four rounds without managing to land a single major blow.

"Why...?! Damn it!! Why is it that you can get it right, and I can't?!" huffed Kitou.

Kitou slammed his desk harder than ever before, baring his anger.

"This isn't an exam you can win without a plan. I know everyone, and that is precisely why I am able to fight wisely," said Katsuragi.

Katsuragi's high level of accuracy was supported by his experiences as a member of both Sakayanagi and Ryuuen's classes. At one time, he had commanded others as a leader of Class A, closely watching his classmates. That was why he was able to recognize the participants' facial expressions, manner of speaking, and tone of voice, as well as gestures throughout the entire process.

"Leave the room, Kitou," commanded Katsuragi.

Kitou answered Katsuragi's blunt order with a glare, but he made no effort to move. Still seated, he slammed his fist on his desk a second time, and then a third.

"Kitou-kun, please exit the room immediately."

An announcement was made urging Kitou to leave, but even so, Kitou didn't get up, and just continued to glare at Katsuragi.

"There's no point in delaying it. The match has been decided," said Katsuragi.

Those words were the trigger. Kitou, his voice clouded with anger, got up from his seat and stood in front of Katsuragi.

"The exit is the other way," said Katsuragi.

"Katsuragi...!"

When Kitou called out Katsuragi's name, he reached with long arms to grab hold of Katsuragi's collar. Katsuragi took in Kitou's anger, which bordered on murderous intent, and merely stood up and looked directly into Kitou's eyes.

"Don't. Acts of violence are strictly forbidden," commanded Katsuragi, speaking to Kitou with a calm tone devoid of panic.

However, Kitou didn't relax his arm, nor show any signs of letting go.

"I recognize your ability. But you simply weren't the right person to be a representative in this special exam. That is all," said Katsuragi.

There was a definite reason why Kitou couldn't hold back his irritation, even though he could blame his own inexperience for losing to Katsuragi. Actually, there was no need for him to suppress his anger over the correct answer.

"Let go of him immediately and move away. If you escalate any further, we will declare this to be an act of violence, Kitou-kun."

Mechanical words from the proctor could be heard over the speaker. Kitou was furious, but he knew he couldn't take this any further, and he released Katsuragi's chest, his hands shaking with fury as he tried to contain his anger.

"I have lost here today..." said Kitou.

Kitou muttered those words bitterly before turning his back on Katsuragi and throwing open the door.

"I had thought that anger might have been for me, but were you looking at Ryuuen beyond me, Kitou?" asked Katsuragi to the loser's back.

But Kitou left without a word, slamming the door behind himself. Katsuragi watched him exit and then took a breath once he was alone in the room. Katsuragi didn't know exactly what had happened between Kitou and Ryuuen, but he knew that, aside from the fact that they were in different classes, Kitou tended to regard Ryuuen as an enemy. Katsuragi guessed that Kitou must have been aiming to defeat him and then bring the hammer down on Ryuuen himself.



Now, there would be a ten-minute interval before Katsuragi's next opponent would appear.

"I guess she managed to get here," thought Katsuragi aloud.

The next person to come through the door was Sakayanagi Arisu, who was serving as the general for Class A. When they had first started at this school, they were classmates and competed with one another over the position of leader. Things were not going to go the same way that they did with Sanada and Kitou. Katsuragi was prepared for that. Now, finally, the time that Katsuragi had been anxiously awaiting had come.

"I am astonished that you defeated my vanguard and center while losing only one Life Point," commented Sakayanagi as she entered the room. She showed no signs of even the slightest agitation.

"Selecting Kitou as a representative out of everyone was a clear mistake," remarked Katsuragi.

"It was his wish, as he wanted to deal with Ryuuken-kun directly. Besides, in this special examination, there is no problem as long as the general is not defeated. I had determined that regardless of whatever form the special exam took, there would be no problem even if I threw away my first two pieces. That is all," said Sakayanagi.

"And such self-conceited pride on your part may lead to your defeat," countered Katsuragi.

"Heh heh. First of all, please allow me to compliment you. I am seeing you in a slightly more positive light now, Katsuragi-kun," said Sakayanagi.

Even though Katsuragi was the only student with experience in two different classes, Sakayanagi hadn't expected Katsuragi would defeat Sanada and Kitou quite so quickly and easily. Such results were the only reason that she was paying him a compliment. In response, Katsuragi solemnly put what had been brewing in his mind into words.

"I've been working vigorously for this day—to get my revenge against you and strike you down," said Katsuragi.

"Revenge? I see. You are referring to Totsuka Yahiko-kun, whom I had driven to expulsion, yes?"

Katsuragi clenched his fists tightly as they rested in his lap. That was his answer.

“If I were still the old me, it would have likely been difficult for me to grasp your feelings, Katsuragi-kun. But now, I understand a little. Perhaps I should have used a different method to select whom to have expelled,” said Sakayanagi.

“Come off it. Are you trying to tell me that you have changed your worldview?” said Katsuragi.

“You can interpret that as you like. It is fine that you are angry, but your vengeance will not be carried out. Now that I am here, things will no longer go your way,” said Sakayanagi.

Katsuragi acknowledged Sakayanagi’s abilities as well, begrudgingly, given his past history of being ousted from the position of leader during his time in Class A. There was no doubt that the format for this particular End-of-Year Special Exam was one that Sakayanagi excelled in. Moreover, Katsuragi was at a disadvantage in terms of Life Points, with his six to her ten. Even so, Katsuragi took his seat with the intention of doing whatever might be necessary to take down his opponent, willing to take a hit if it meant her downfall.

“Now then, the next discussion will begin.”

Both representatives closed their mouths once the announcement was made, and they straightened their posture once more. The battle of Katsuragi vs. Sakayanagi was starting.

Chapter 7: Bitter Tears

THE TEN-MINUTE COUNT for the interval had begun. On the monitor, the digital timer was counting down the seconds. Horikita, after defeating Hamaguchi and coming out unscathed, sat in her chair and waited for Kanzaki, the center. Even if Kanzaki came in within the ten-minute period, in essence, this was a break time until the countdown reached zero. In the meantime, Horikita was going over the rules for the special exam once more in her mind.

Centers started with seven Life Points. Excluding mistakes made by your opponent, up to three points could be taken away in a single move. While it was exceedingly natural to want to make the first move, there was risk involved in nominating at an early stage. That said, it was also true that if you passed consecutively, it meant you'd be falling behind. In fact, it was Hirata endeavoring to maintain a defensive stance that had led to his defeat. Horikita thought about what type of person Kanzaki Ryuuji was. It looked like he was, essentially, the same as Hirata and Hamaguchi, someone who emphasized defense, but...

"But there's a good chance that he will launch an offensive to turn the tide..." mused Horikita, the words slipping through her lips unintentionally.

If an opponent were prepared to keep nominating regardless of the damage they'd incur, it would be difficult to avoid losing any points. If that happened, then Horikita's battle with the general would become even tougher. Horikita put her mind to work, trying to produce some ideas to defeat Kanzaki while coming out unscathed. However, no matter how much thought she put into it, her options were limited.

Ultimately, you could say it was up to the eye whether one could spot who was cast into what role in the discussion to come. Or Horikita supposed that if she could guide her opponent well, and continue to cause them to pass...

Then, while Horikita still hadn't solidified her plans for the next battle, the classroom door opened and Kanzaki appeared with just under four minutes remaining on the timer. Kanzaki, without a word,

took a look around the classroom, sat down in an empty seat, and then took a breath.

“Hello. Let’s do our best,” said Horikita, essentially thinking that she ought to offer him somewhat of a greeting, but Kanzaki looked at Horikita with a grim expression on his face.

“Whose idea was it to have Ayanokouji be general?” he asked.

“That’s a very sudden question,” replied Horikita.

“Was it yours, Horikita? Or was it Ayanokouji’s, perhaps? Why did Ayanokouji accept? When was it decided?” asked Kanzaki.

Kanzaki interrogated Horikita intensely, sounding like he was going beyond the realm of asking questions, while staring at her so intensely that it seemed he was about to take a bite out of her.

“Our class is free to have whomever be the general, for whatever reason, chosen at any time. Isn’t that so?” replied Horikita.

“The Ayanokouji I know isn’t the type of person who would have voluntarily come forward publicly. That’s not his personality. Someone must have convinced him to do it. Am I right?” Kanzaki pushed.

“I’m not so sure about that. I think he might be changing, little by little,” said Horikita.

Although Horikita wasn’t going to mention it, she had wished for Ayanokouji to appear as the general, and she was the center for her class because she had accepted his proposal. Of course, part of that deal was that Ayanokouji didn’t wish to actually have to appear on the front lines even in the later stages of the exam, so Ayanokouji wasn’t actually extremely far removed from the Ayanokouji that Kanzaki knew, after all.

“Are we done here? I’d like to focus on the exam,” said Horikita.

“I suppose,” replied Kanzaki.

An announcement was made, declaring the beginning of the discussion, and Horikita lowered her eyes to her tablet. She then selected a new group from those assembled. The further the rounds progressed, the more naturally the participants’ roles would be exposed over the course of conversation. However, the more exceptional the student and the better they were at conversing, the better they tended to be at hiding their role.

On the other hand, the opposite was true for students who were poor liars or who didn't find conversation to be their forte. Representatives could either choose students who were difficult to unmask, or they could deliberately choose students that were easy to unmask. Preferences varied depending on the representative. The match was basically decided once the representatives chose who to assign into their groups of seven.

Discussion No. 1

Participants

Class 2-B

Ijuuin Wataru, Sudou Ken, Miyake Akito, Ichihashi Ruri, Onodera Kayano, Nishimura Ryuuko, Matsushita Chiaki

Class 2-D

Watanabe Norihito, Yonezu Haruto, Sumida Makoto, Aragaki Itsuki, Iguchi Mashiro, Himeno Yuki, Ninomiya Yui

Horikita had chosen a group of seven who were well suited for debate and who could fight, with a group made up of students who were calm, students who were gutsy, and students who had a poker face.

On the monitor, she could see the fourteen students take their seats around the round table, as they were instructed. The participant's respective tablets placed at their seats now displayed what their assigned roles were. Both representatives would check everywhere and everything over the monitors, poring over the available information to see if there were any students behaving suspiciously or if any of the participants made eye contact with a particular student.

However, not a single student acted in such an obvious way; all of them acted appropriately and reliably, looking around with a straight face. Horikita suddenly felt a surge of unexpected happiness when she saw Sudou on the other side of the screen, keeping his expression calm. In the past, he would have been a completely inappropriate choice of candidate for a group like this. Sudou had grown quite a lot over the past two years, and for a moment, Horikita was enveloped in a warm, almost parental feeling. She continued to watch over Sudou with stern

affection, though she also kept her eyes on the entire discussion group as the five-minute period counted down.

Perhaps because many of the students in the discussion were on the safe side, few of them let anything slip even though it was their first round of debate, and so Horikita and Kanzaki both chose to pass. Little progress was seen in that round or the next, which resulted in only two students being ejected from the room by the model student. However, the representatives couldn't just sit back and watch forever.

Then came round three. Miyake, who came forward and announced that he was a graduate, said that Watanabe was a model student. Inevitably, that resulted in a debate with Watanabe, who denied the assertion, and it was now time for the third nomination.

A pass here was highly likely to entail a great degree of risk, but at the same time, it was also an opportunity. The first point to consider was whether or not to trust Miyake, the self-proclaimed graduate. Kanzaki determined that Miyake was the graduate and nominated Watanabe as a model student. Horikita, on the other hand, concluded that Miyake was a model student, and that Watanabe was something else, and so nominated Miyake as a model student. The two representatives, both forgoing a pass in order to act on their opposing conclusions.

“Announcing the results. Horikita-san identified Miyake-kun as the model student, so Kanzaki-kun loses three Life Points. In addition, because Kanzaki-kun has nominated erroneously, he will lose one Life Point.”

With only a slight difference in judgment, a sudden change was brought about, resulting in the Life Point totals going from seven-to-seven to seven-to-three. The results showed that Miyake was a model student and that Watanabe was not. Now, there was only one model student left. The participants realized something from this development. Unlike in other, similar games, this discussion wasn't limited to cases of someone coming forward and announcing their role, and the situation might not unfold as expected.

The only risk for a position holder in coming forward themselves was the risk of being nominated. Also, as it was extremely difficult for the model student to win, another strategy could emerge if someone holding a position could be nominated by the representative or even themselves, so that they could access information for their own convenience. Miyake seemed to have indicated a plan for going for that

reward this time. However, the main focus was the special exam, and only the special exam. The real goal was to have the representative win, rather than have the participants get Private Points from their victories, and by having those who hold a position come forward and announce themselves, it stimulated discussion and prevented stalling out.

This series of nominations had a tremendous impact on the next round, largely because Miyake's exit clearly caused Ninomiya to be severely and visibly shaken. She was so obviously upset that anyone would be convinced that she wasn't acting. She was another model student, and Horikita and Kanzaki nominated her as such without hesitation. As everyone expected, it was established that Ninomiya was a model student. This discussion was a quick turnaround that ended with a win for the average students.

"...May I speak with you for a moment?" asked Kanzaki.

Kanzaki, who had lost four points in the first discussion, called out to Horikita as they were moving on to the next discussion.

"What is it?" asked Horikita.

Horikita, taking a quick glance at the ten-minute interval countdown displayed on the monitor, braced herself for the possibility that Kanzaki was intending to try to shake her up mentally. With a mysterious, meek look on his face, Kanzaki pushed his chair back and stood up. Then, he walked over to stand in front of Horikita.

"I have a favor to ask of you. I understand that it is bizarre to request something like this, but my class is in a situation where we cannot care about appearances anymore. Please, I'm begging you, will you please hand over victory in this End-of-Year Special Exam to us, Class D?" asked Kanzaki.

Horikita had intended to deal with whatever came out of Kanzaki's mouth calmly. However, what he had said was just far too unexpected. It was a request she hadn't even remotely considered.

"Are you being serious? I'm sorry, but I find what you just said to be unbelievable," said Horikita.

Asking someone to lose on purpose for you, in a serious head-to-head confrontation, in an important special exam that would determine the class rankings? The idea was easy to understand, but it was a request that would take time to process. Was it perhaps an intentional statement then, made upon the understanding that it couldn't possibly

be accepted? Suspecting as much, a stern expression appeared on Horikita's face.

"Yes, I'm sure it's true that what I said sounds like an erratic statement. But I am serious. We in Class D are at the end of our ropes. If we lose in this End-of-Year Special Exam, the gap between us and the top class will be definitive. You could very well say that if we lose, we'll have passed the point of no return," said Kanzaki.

If Sakayanagi's class won and Ichinose's class lost, the gap between those classes would become so hopeless that Kanzaki didn't even want to think about it. It would be so wide that even if Ichinose's class earned dramatic victories in one or two special exams, they wouldn't make up the difference.

"Regarding this special exam, one aspect I am thankful for is that the losing class will not be docked Class Points. Which means that your class would still have a chance next year, Horikita. Even if Sakayanagi were to win by a reasonable lead, a year would be plenty of time for you to make up the difference," added Kanzaki.

Kanzaki, who could no longer care about appearances, and taking advantage of this highly secretive situation they were both in, made a request that was devoid of all pride. Kanzaki bowed his head deeply before Horikita to prove his sincerity.

"This isn't something to which I can just say, 'Yes, okay, I understand, I'll hand it over to you,' just because you bow to me. For the sake of argument, if this were a person-to-person exchange, then sure, there is a possibility that we could work something out. But this is a class versus class battle. Just as you are fighting for your class, I am fighting for mine," said Horikita.

"Yes, I understand, of course," said Kanzaki.

"If you understood, then you wouldn't have started by asking for a favor that couldn't be granted in the first place," snapped Horikita.

"I understand, but I don't have any other choice," replied Kanzaki. "Of course, I don't intend to ask you to hand over your victory for nothing. I will most definitely do what I can to make up for it. I could constantly provide support and backing for your class in our third-year battles, Horikita. I'm sure that normally you might not trust someone on that, but if it's coming from Ichinose of all people, then I'm sure you can trust us."

Kanzaki brought up the name of his own class leader, offering it up as though it were a guarantee.

“Yes, it’s true that Ichinose-san may not be the type of person who would betray us very easily. But that kind of statement would only be effective if she herself put that into words and made an appeal to me personally, not if you’re using her credibility to negotiate your way to victory, no? Besides, do you even have her permission in the first place?” asked Horikita.

“That’s—”

“If you lose here, Kanzaki-kun, then that means that Ichinose-san will inevitably come forward. If this conversation were to happen at that time, then it would be much more viable. But the fact that it’s not happening that way suggests that this conversation is all an arbitrary move on your part, right, Kanzaki-kun?” she asked.

Kanzaki merely cleared his throat in response to such an obvious point.

“You’re not even the leader of your class. And making some arbitrary guarantee of your own accord that you’ll fully back us up next year? That’s absurd. Even if it wasn’t, there is absolutely no conceivable way I would trust you on that,” added Horikita.

“Ichinose is...not the type of person who could ask someone to hand over a win, regardless of what she really feels deep down. But I’m certain that she feels the same way that I do, she just can’t say it. With Ayanokouji waiting ahead for us in this situation, we don’t even have a one-in-a-million chance of winning!” replied Kanzaki.

If Kanzaki were to pursue the win, then he would need to not only beat Horikita by any means necessary, but also reduce Ayanokouji’s Life Points as much as possible. However, at present, he hadn’t even been able to wound Horikita, which put him in a predicament.

“You certainly hold Ayanokouji-kun in very high esteem,” said Horikita.

“Yes. Ayanokouji is quite formidable. Which is why the outcome is already as good as settled,” said Kanzaki.

“I don’t like it,” snapped Horikita.

“You don’t like it? What? I’m just telling you the truth.”

“I’m not saying it’s not the truth. But I don’t like it.”

Seeing Kanzaki so quickly accepting defeat made Horikita disappointed and angry. Yes, it was certainly true that she had a powerful ally behind her. And usually she'd be grateful for the fact that her opponents were in terrified awe of him. Even so, Horikita tried putting herself in Ichinose's position, thinking from the position of a classmate.

"You are undervaluing Ichinose-san, your class leader. The moment that the details of the special exam were announced, I thought that she would be a more formidable enemy than anyone else. Her friendships and powers of perception cannot be underestimated. She might be a more troublesome opponent than even Sakayanagi-san or Ryuen-kun," said Horikita.

Kanzaki, despite having settled into the position of adviser for his class, trusted Ichinose less than anyone else. Ichinose, though, surely trusted Kanzaki and had entrusted him with the position of center. That was why Horikita didn't like his attitude.

"If you ask me, I'd say that things are still equal in this situation," added Horikita.

"Equal. Equal, huh? I wonder about that," replied Kanzaki.

It seemed that Kanzaki wasn't going to change his mindset one bit, despite what Horikita said.

"Let's end this now. Continuing this conversation any longer would make me uncomfortable," said Horikita. She shot him a look, her gaze saying, *"Hurry back to your seat."*

However, Kanzaki stayed still.

"I can't... If we lose, this really will be the end for us!" pleaded Kanzaki.

"So you're going to continue with your meaningless whining?" Horikita responded, keeping her voice even. However, deep down, she felt a slight ripple on the surface of her heart.



“I don’t care what you think of me. But I can’t let my dream of making it to Class A end here,” said Kanzaki.

Even though students from other classes would be appalled or infuriated by his begging, Kanzaki persisted. He was fully aware of the fact that this was an absurd request. But Kanzaki was so burdened by the situation in his class that he couldn’t back down, even if it meant he had to suffer shame upon shame.

“You have certainly conveyed your determination, at least. Normally, you wouldn’t want to bow down like this and earnestly ask for help, I suppose. But I have no intention of negotiating,” said Horikita.

Even Horikita could guess just how much courage it would take for him to do something like this. It was a heartbreaking plea. While anger was Horikita’s first reaction, she couldn’t help but feel a small measure of pity for him. However, it didn’t mean that she would hesitate, compromise, or be lenient for his sake. No, it was more accurate to say that she could not.

“This is unpleasant. I don’t like having to refuse a request, no matter what it is,” said Horikita.

“I understand that this offends you...” said Kanzaki.

Kanzaki kept his head down, staying bowed, not budging an inch. He was trying to bring about reform, and he had just begun the act of gathering the students who weren’t merely adoring fans of Ichinose. Even so, it would take time for his plans to blossom. If he suffered a major defeat before those plans could take root, then such reform would no longer even have any meaning. Kanzaki thought that as long as Ayanokouji didn’t make any moves in the End-of-Year Special Exam, then he could still do something. However, Ayanokouji was going to be participating as the general today.

“Please!”

Kanzaki’s voice was strained as he wrung the word out of his throat. No matter how many times Kanzaki begged, there was no feasible way that any of his appeals or proposals would sway Horikita. He should have known that from the very beginning. Now, even though Kanzaki knew, he had no other choice but to ask, so he kept making his request.

“I will not hold anything back. I recognize your abilities, Kanzaki-kun, as well as Ichinose-san’s. But right now, my role is to fight with all my might, no matter who my opponent is,” replied Horikita.

No one liked the idea of bowing down before someone else. Nevertheless, Horikita showed the utmost consideration for Kanzaki, who was bowing down for the sake of his class—that is, she would fight with all of her might and earn the results to show for it.

“I see...” replied Kanzaki.

There was very little time left in the interval when Kanzaki returned to his chair, his head still hanging low. Soon afterward, the monitors came on, and a new discussion was about to begin. Horikita looked away from Kanzaki and turned her attention back to the screen. She couldn’t keep her attention focused solely on Kanzaki any longer. What she needed to do now was discern what roles the participants had based on the conversations that were about to unfold on the other end of the monitor.

A new discussion was beginning. Kanzaki’s face was turned toward the monitor, but while his eyes were pointed at the screen, he was only looking and not properly watching. At the end of the round, Horikita chose to pass. Kanzaki, with slow, unhurried motions, also chose to pass. Even though the discussion had begun again, Kanzaki wasn’t engaging with it seriously after all. It seemed like he was simply waiting to lose.

“Have you given up?” asked Horikita, her voice cutting through the monitor’s audio.

“No matter what I accomplish here, I’ve already seen what the outcome will be,” said Kanzaki.

Which meant that from the outset, Kanzaki had abandoned the idea of fighting seriously. He realized that even if, hypothetically, he did defeat Horikita as the opposing center, he would have merely replaced Horikita with Ayanokouji as the person with whom he would have to negotiate. Horikita, having lost her patience with this cowardly behavior, rose from her seat during the ongoing discussion and went over to stand in front of him.

“You were chosen to be a representative of your class, weren’t you? Then you ought to face this special exam with some backbone, with the determination to defeat me and Ayanokouji-kun yourself. That

is the basic courtesy you should be giving to your classmates,” snapped Horikita.

“You’re the one acting strangely here. Don’t bother throwing me a rope, or anything of the sort. You can just leave me alone,” said Kanzaki.

“I suppose so. You’re right,” said Horikita.

The match was decided. From the start, the discussion and nomination rounds proceeded dispassionately, without any sense of tension. Kanzaki, having already given up, continued to pass, not making any nominations. Horikita persuaded herself not to feel sorry for him, and warily decided to make a second nomination.

“Horikita-san identified Mine-kun as the model student, so Kanzaki-kun loses three Life Points. Now that Kanzaki-kun’s Life Points have been depleted, we ask that he please leave the room at this time.”

Even after the announcement of the results, Kanzaki remained still. It looked as though he didn’t even hear the announcement.

“Kanzaki-kun.”

Horikita called his name. After a slight pause, Kanzaki’s eyes suddenly focused, and he looked at Horikita.

“Ah, I see. I’ve lost now, I suppose,” Kanzaki muttered, as though he were speaking about someone else, and then pushed back his chair and stood up.

Horikita wondered whether she should try to talk to Kanzaki some more as he walked away, but she decided against it. A winner and a loser. At the very least, now that their match had been decided, any words spoken by Horikita here and now likely wouldn’t have any positive effect on Kanzaki. Up until this point, Horikita had been focused solely on the thought of winning along with her class, but for every winner, there was a loser. Alone in the representative’s room, Horikita stared at the unoccupied participant’s room displayed on the monitor.

“I am going to move up to Class A. I will fight for that goal, but...”

For Horikita, the idea of graduating from Class A held great significance. Not for the sake of her future, but rather, for the sake of recognition from her older brother. She wanted to be praised for leading

the way from Class D to Class A—that was her biggest driving force.

But what about Kanzaki? Was it so that he could have the options of a better university or workplace? Or was it because he wanted to give those benefits to his fellow classmates? Horikita, who had little connection to Kanzaki, couldn't understand the true meaning of the loser's desires for wanting to reach Class A. However, one thing she was certain of was that he, too, had a strong purpose, the same as her. This thought remained on her mind until her next opponent, Ichinose, appeared.

7.1

MEANWHILE, KATSURAGI and Sakayanagi were facing off. The discussion had proceeded slowly and leisurely, and the first round ended without incident. Katsuragi had watched both classes very attentively but was unable to suss out any decisive information.

"It seems as though everyone is giving rather true-to-life performances as they engage in the discussion. It's rather difficult for either of us to narrow down the roles based on the current situation, wouldn't you say?" said Sakayanagi.

"Perhaps," replied Katsuragi.

Sakayanagi's statement, which made it sound like she had given up on getting anything from this round herself, would typically have come as a relief. Normally, one might think, *"Thank goodness, she hasn't gotten anything yet either."* However, Katsuragi's opponent was none other than Sakayanagi. It wouldn't be easy for him to discern truth and lies. As Katsuragi held that thought, he dismissed his feelings of relief.

"If you're thinking of trying to act all innocent with me, I suggest you stop," said Katsuragi.

"I see. So you have it in your head that I have already ascertained what the roles are," said Sakayanagi.

"You and I may be in different positions, but if you're not careful, you may find the rug pulled out from under you," warned Katsuragi.

"If that is what you think, then surely it is unnecessary for you to

offer me advice, no?" replied Sakayanagi.

Katsuragi was trying to probe Sakayanagi and draw out clues about what she was going to do, but that wasn't going to be an easy task. He decided to take a step back, judging that it would be dangerous to carelessly set foot in his opponent's ring. Katsuragi still had plenty of Life Points left, and it wasn't too late for him to see what approach Sakayanagi would take.

"Unfortunately, there were too few clues to be gained in the current round. I will allow you to make the first move," said Katsuragi, taking a conservative approach and pulling back.

"That is rather like you, isn't it? If you judge something to be difficult, you carry on with an emphasis on safety. You wish to defeat me by your own hand but with the advantage of your experience in having fought two opponents already. So you are trying to shift your focus to shaving down my points in a sound and measured fashion, rather than trying to aim for a bombastic victory, prepared to risk self-destruction," said Sakayanagi.

"That is standard practice for me. Eagerness can lead to carelessness," replied Katsuragi.

"That is truly splendid. So you are saying that you feel no sense of eagerness in going against me whatsoever," said Sakayanagi.

Katsuragi felt a twinge of annoyance at Sakayanagi's emphasis on the word "whatsoever." It was impossible for him to not be eager at all, of course, but his instincts were telling him that he couldn't admit to being even a little eager here.

"None whatsoever. While it is true that I am here to defeat you, that does not mean I intend to fight with my personal feelings at the forefront, as Kitou did. This is a team fight," said Katsuragi, asserting that he was not eager at all, as though that was the way things ought to be.

"Heh heh heh." Sakayanagi, chuckling as though she found something comical about this, slowly raised her thin arm and pointed at the base of Katsuragi's throat.

"What...?" asked Katsuragi.

"None whatsoever.' You must be joking. In truth, your emotions are running unabashedly high, and you want to think of nothing else

but beating me. You do not care one whit about your classmates or anything like that; you just want to fight as you please and bring me down directly, by your own hand. Is that not what you're thinking?" asked Sakayanagi.

"I'm not going to fall for your tricks, Sakayanagi. I'm sorry, but your judgment of me is incorrect," said Katsuragi.

"Oh, is that so? In that case, why don't you straighten that sloppily tied necktie of yours?" asked Sakayanagi.

"My...necktie?" asked Katsuragi.

Katsuragi lowered his gaze and pulled back his chin to look at his tie around the base of his neck. When he did, he realized that his tie, which should have been fastened tightly, had loosened a great deal. *When did that happen?* He wondered as he took a breath and casually tightened his tie around his neck.

"If you had been your usual calm and collected self, you should have noticed your messy necktie straight away, Katsuragi-kun. However, before your sworn enemy had arrived in the room, your gaze and attention had been focused on the doorway for the entire time. You must have spent the entire not-so-short interval period of ten minutes just staring. Didn't you?" said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi had looked at the state of things in minute detail over the security camera. After saying as much and displaying her powers of perception, Sakayanagi smiled.

"I cannot believe you would say that you are not at all eager. Honestly, that is a transparent lie, isn't it?" said Sakayanagi.

"That is just convenient conjecture on your part. There is no way you could know something like how long my necktie has been loose," said Katsuragi.

He pretended to be calm when he responded, trying not to let her set the pace. However, Sakayanagi had anticipated that response from the start.

"I can see that, apparently, you have been eager for a while, and it is leaving you upset and shaken. First, you ought to calm down and think it through. What was the cause of your necktie being loose? Kitou-kun, who had been entrusted with the position of center, lost, and he flew into a rage and grabbed you, didn't he?" said Sakayanagi.

“Because his goal was to defeat Ryuuken directly, from the sound of it,” replied Katsuragi.

“Yes. However, did he do such a thing solely out of frustration? What if, in fact, that was not the case, and I had instructed him ahead of time to rustle up your tie once his defeat was certain?” asked Sakayanagi.

The representatives stepping into the room as a new challenger couldn’t possibly know what kind of battle had taken place in the room before. Therefore, in regards to information warfare, they would be forced to start from a position one step behind the representative who had already been fighting. So, as a countermeasure, Sakayanagi had laid a small trap. Namely, that if Kitou were defeated by Katsuragi, he was to grab his tie, which would easily be considered a blind spot, and mess it up. There was no great significance in messing up Katsuragi’s necktie in itself.

However, that changed when it could be used as evidence to reveal a gap between Katsuragi’s official stance and his true feelings. Even if Kitou wasn’t much use in the actual exam, this plan showed the meaning behind his being selected. A student like Sanada couldn’t possibly fill such a role. Up until this point, Katsuragi had conducted himself more calmly, a cut above his opponents Sanada and Kitou. He wanted to fight against Sakayanagi on equal or better terms and had tried to keep that momentum going, but at the end of the first round, any mental leeway that he had was buried thanks to this conversation, and now the tables had been turned on him. The powerful enemy before him saw through everything, and he was forcibly made aware of that. With a big smile still on her face, Sakayanagi looked at the scene on the other side of the screen.

“Now then, since neither one of us knows what is going on yet, let us proceed to the second round, shall we?” said Sakayanagi.

They could now hear voices come through the monitor, and the discussion began once again among the group, which had shrunk to thirteen participants.

7.2

AROUND THE SAME TIME, Horikita triumphed over Kanzaki.

Fortunately for Horikita, even after three rounds, including her match-up against Hamaguchi, she hadn't suffered any damage. Especially in her third battle, since Kanzaki was unable to concentrate on the exam, she hadn't even really had an honest-to-goodness match. After about five minutes had passed, the door to the representative's room had opened, and Ichinose finally appeared.

"That was amazing, Horikita-san. I didn't think you'd defeat both Hamaguchi-kun and Kanzaki-kun without taking any damage at all," said Ichinose.

"It just happened that way," said Horikita.

Horikita was being humble. Ichinose smiled warmly at her as she took her seat. Horikita couldn't detect any impatience or tension in her, at the very least. Nor could she see any anxiety about the fact that her class was sending out their general first, before Horikita's class.

"Let's both give it everything we've got and do our best, okay?" said Ichinose.

"Yes," replied Horikita.

Horikita, who had already experienced the discussions before Ichinose did, ended up becoming awfully stiff. Horikita wondered if, before now, Ichinose had talked to Kanzaki and asked him about what had happened. There were only a few minutes left in the interval, but it was possible that he could have told her the details about how he had lost when they passed each other. Horikita didn't know if Kanzaki would have been honest about it all though, as it was tantamount to practically giving up. Horikita figured that, no, it was probably more likely that he didn't say anything about it to Ichinose. In that case, Horikita thought that perhaps she could use that as a means to upset Ichinose, and—

"You know, come to think of it, lately, I get the feeling that your vibe has kind of changed a little from how it used to be, Horikita-san," said Ichinose.

When Horikita was lost in thought, Ichinose spoke to her as though she were just making friendly idle chitchat.

"I have to wonder about that. I don't really think anything about

me has changed, though. If anything has changed from before, the only thing I can think of would be the length of my hair?" said Horikita.

"Nah, not that. I mean stuff other than physical appearance. It's like, your aura has gotten gentler and kinder, I think. Like, you've gotten a lot more approachable than before," said Ichinose.

"I'm...not so sure. I didn't mean for that to happen at all, though," said Horikita.

"But you've been getting more opportunities to talk and hang out with both guys and girls than before, right?" said Ichinose.

"Well, that's... Yeah, I have. Sure, compared to the old days, that might be true," said Horikita.

That wasn't something that her old self would have considered. In that sense, Horikita felt she could accept the idea of it.

"I've been hearing a lot of things about you lately too, Horikita-san," said Ichinose.

Both Ichinose and Horikita had each chosen their groups, and now, a new discussion was about to begin.

"Hearing a lot of things about me? From whom, exactly?" asked Horikita.

"Hm? Who? Everyone, really," said Ichinose, smiling warmly as she looked at the monitor. "I think that it's wonderful to get closer to your classmates and deepen your friendships. I myself have reached out to everyone to try to get to know them better and be friendly. It wasn't that I wanted to make use of that, of course, but I guess I realized that sometimes, the things that you do day in and day out can pay off."

What Ichinose said really was nothing more than small talk. But even so, Horikita couldn't help but feel unsettled. Now that the discussion had begun in earnest, Ichinose and Horikita were no longer exchanging words with each other. For five minutes, they just quietly watched the fourteen people converse. There was no particular difference between how things were before, when Horikita was up against Hamaguchi or Kanzaki; it was still the same special exam. Horikita was observing carefully, but of course, she still hadn't arrived at a conclusion about the roles yet.

Horikita thought that she would simply pass in the first round, of course, but even so, her first step was to see what Ichinose's approach

would be. Should she gesture like she was going to nominate, or should she pass without hesitation? In either case, Horikita decided that she would choose to pass, since nothing that seemed like usable information came out of the initial round. After waiting for a while, Horikita chose to pass as planned, since time was running out. However...



“Ichinose-san identified Chiba-kun as a position holder, so Horikita-san loses one Life Point.”

Horikita had no idea how Ichinose could have arrived at that answer, but Ichinose had succeeded in making a quick nomination.

“Yeah, okay. I thought it was Chiba-kun,” Ichinose mused.

She said as much without faltering. She didn’t stammer at all. Ichinose said that student’s name as though the findings were a matter of course. Horikita had faced Hamaguchi and Kanzaki thus far, but neither of them made a nomination in the first round. Everyone, Horikita included, had chosen to pass. Though Horikita didn’t have a grasp on the exact details, she figured that Hirata, who had gone first for her class, wouldn’t have been an exception to that either. Perhaps it was because an announcement had been made in the room urging Chiba of Class D to leave the room, but Horikita could tell the students on the other side of the monitor were a little bit flustered, even though the representatives couldn’t hear any sound. That was because they didn’t know on what basis he was nominated.

“You did a good job in figuring that out,” Horikita muttered reflexively, unable to help being impressed.

“It’s just because I’ve been seeing these people from up close, more closely than others, I think. Even if I didn’t hear anything directly from Chiba-kun, there are moments when I can tell whether he’s lying or telling the truth by watching his gestures,” said Ichinose.

Ichinose seemed to be saying, *“I know everything there is to know about my best friend.”*

“You were especially close to him, then,” said Horikita.

“Especially? No, I wouldn’t say especially. I feel like I can probably tell as much about others as I can about Chiba-kun. I think I saw a little bit of who else had been appointed to roles in the discussion too, but I wasn’t sure about the other one yet, so I thought I’d wait and see,” said Ichinose.

Horikita felt a shiver run up her spine over how casually Ichinose made that statement. She just said that she had discerned the positions of multiple students simply from watching a single discussion. If Horikita had been up against someone like Sakayanagi or Ryuen, she would have strongly suspected that would be a bluff. But since this was

coming from none other than Ichinose, Horikita couldn't help but be tempted to think it was really true.

"I see. If that's the case, then I'm going to be put in a corner before long. *If it's true, that is,*" snapped Horikita.

Horikita, hating the fact that the situation had instantly turned stifling, straightened her posture and fired back with snark. Ichinose was a student who didn't easily tell lies. That was precisely why bluffing in this situation would be extremely effective. If Horikita assumed that Ichinose's statement was true, then it would make her hurry to make a nomination, but if it was a lie, then there wouldn't be anything more foolish than running ahead recklessly.

In reality, the fact that Ichinose was able to spot a position holder was brilliant, but Horikita still had doubts as to how much of that was due to her keen observation skills. Unlike the model students, the odds of getting it correct by nominating someone as position holder weren't that bad, considering there were four possible students you could name out of the fourteen participants. It was quite possible that it was coincidence, or that Ichinose simply went out on a limb and succeeded.

Since panicking wasn't going to change her chances of success in the current situation, Horikita recited to herself various scenarios and tried to exercise self-control. It was still a little too risky to make a play when the probability was low. Instead of letting herself get carried away by the situation, Horikita tried to think about how she could handle herself, to directly carry herself to victory.

She had lost one Life Point. It wasn't a serious degree of damage—that was a significant detail. Horikita settled down and tried to concentrate.

The second round began. Horikita wanted to find clues to help her discern what the roles were from how participants acted first, before Ichinose did. That's what she had wished, but the five minutes of discussion offered few clues, and it passed by in the blink of an eye.

The time for nomination was coming, and Horikita did not get enough information to do anything decisive. However, even if she was fine with choosing the option of passing again, she needed to stop each time and think. Horikita wondered if there was anything in the discussion that just happened that would be enough for Ichinose to make another nomination. She wondered if what Ichinose said at the end of the first round was true. Horikita had not yet found any

information or pretext to be able to launch an offensive, but...

Two people had already been removed from the room because of Ichinose's nomination and the nomination from the model student. Horikita decided to go on the offensive, going after someone she suspected could have been a position holder, so that she could get a feel for things.

“Announcing the results. Ichinose-san identified Minamikata-san as a position holder, so Horikita-san loses one Life Point. Also, because Horikita-san has nominated erroneously, she will lose one Life Point.”

Horikita had decided to go with her determination and make a nomination, but the situation worsened. Not only did she get it wrong, but Ichinose had once again made a successful nomination. The only silver lining for Horikita here was that she had nominated an average student, so the wounds she suffered were shallow.

“Did you really know? That Minamikata-san was a position holder?” asked Horikita.

“Yep,” Ichinose replied. “She was one of the people who I was wondering about in the first round.”

Ichinose had correctly guessed one of the position holders, without hesitation, out of the twelve participants remaining. On top of that, from the way she spoke, there were other candidates that caught her attention as well. Horikita, having a hunch that Ichinose was telling the truth, started to feel slightly dizzy.

“In that case, are you saying that the number of people you can nominate has grown after these two rounds?” asked Horikita.

“Yeah. I still can't distinguish them from the model students yet, but there are three other people I have my eye on,” said Ichinose.

As she said that, Ichinose turned to Horikita and looked her straight into her eyes. It wasn't a lie. Without a doubt, Ichinose was going to continue making nominations from this point onward, in a calm and collected manner. If Horikita wasn't careful, she could even discover a model student next time. If that happened, Horikita might only have one more round left, in the shortest possible scenario.

It was impossible for Horikita *not* to feel dizzy by this turn of events. Horikita wondered if, no matter what kind of person she was sitting in her seat right now, this was an opponent against whom she

couldn't win. Horikita couldn't help but feel terrified of Ichinose's astonishing powers of perception. There was a total of ten minutes of discussion that Horikita had thought to have yielded no promising clues whatsoever. She wondered if perhaps she had overlooked something, but thinking back on it, Horikita couldn't find anything that stuck out in her mind, even when she focused only on the two students that Ichinose had identified correctly.

"I was lucky. The two people I picked out were friends from my class," said Ichinose.

With those words, Horikita had regained some of her composure. The only difference, if there was one, was that. Even if you were being charitable, you couldn't say that Horikita knew the students in Ichinose's class very well. On the other hand, Ichinose understood her classmates better than anyone else.

In any case, Horikita didn't have much of a buffer remaining. That was why Horikita had decided to start attacking aggressively from this point on, because even if she tried fighting this fight simply with a head-on approach, her opponent would continue to dominate the field. If Horikita was inferior in terms of friendships and the observations that came with those relationships, then she had no other choice but to try to rattle, fluster, and deceive Ichinose.

"You certainly have pulled one over on me. And splendidly so. But I have a feeling about this special exam, since I've been fighting for a while now already. My interpretation is that the exam is designed in such a way that the position holders are distributed between the two classes almost equally, in the interest of fairness. If that's true, then it's highly likely that the remaining position holders are among my classmates. It may be difficult even for someone like you to correctly identify the remaining position holders, then," said Horikita.

Horikita was deliberately trying to draw Ichinose's attention toward her own classmates. She figured that if doing so might narrow Ichinose's field of vision, even a little bit, then...

"Horikita-san. If what you're saying is true, then that means you're giving me a clue. Why would you so easily give me vital information that you gleaned first from engaging in this special exam before I started?" asked Ichinose.

Ichinose didn't question whether what Horikita said was true or false, she was simply asking the reason Horikita was being so nice.

“You had guessed correctly twice in a row thanks to the fact that the position holders were your classmates,” Horikita shot back. “I simply wanted to let you know that the next ones won’t be so easy.”

That was a completely blatant lie, of course. It probably came out sounding like a pitiful lie made out of desperation, but Horikita didn’t care. Even if there was a 99 percent probability of being taken as a lie, she was fine with just that slim chance. While in truth, it was unclear exactly what criteria the school was using to select the position holders, it wasn’t necessarily wrong to speculate that the criteria wouldn’t lead to blatant inequities. Even if there was an extreme bias in a single discussion, the distribution should be close to 1:1 across all of the discussions as a whole.

“Well, then, I’d better get my head in the game and try my hardest!” replied Ichinose happily.

Ichinose, nodding once with a “Yeah,” shifted her gaze toward the monitor, her warm, kind smile never leaving her face the entire time. Horikita had made her attempt to fluster Ichinose for the third round. The third round ended quickly as well, like it was a race, and the time for nominations had come.

“Horikita-san identified Hattori-kun as a position holder, so Horikita-san gains one Life Point.”

Ichinose, who had correctly identified students twice consecutively so far, had chosen to pass. Horikita, relieved by this, had correctly identified a position holder. However, because the student she had nominated was an underclassman, Horikita couldn’t achieve her goal of dealing damage to Ichinose. What she knew at this point in time was that there were still two model students left, that three position holders had been nominated by the representatives, and that the remaining position holder may have already been removed from the room thanks to a model student. The denominator was steadily decreasing, and Horikita doubted whether she could hold back from attacking until the next round. There was currently one move that Horikita could make right now. If she was in a situation where she couldn’t care about what people might think of her, then she had no other choice but to bring up *that* topic.

“You know, when I fought against Kanzaki-kun earlier, it was a total victory for me. But it wasn’t just because of my ability. Rather, Kanzaki-kun went and lost on his own, so that I would win. Did you

receive a report about that?" asked Horikita.

"No, Kanzaki-kun didn't say anything," replied Ichinose.

"I see. In that case, I wonder if you understand the meaning of what I said," said Horikita.

Horikita tried to draw Ichinose's interest, apportioning information that she would find curious in tiny amounts. Ichinose, however, answered without changing the expression on her face at all.

"I understand. Kanzaki-kun started feeling hopeless early on when he found out that Ayanokouji-kun was waiting in the wings after you, Horikita-san. 'There's no way we can win.' He probably said something like that. He gave it his best shot as the center for our class, trying hard and trying to do something, but then you got the lead, Horikita-san, and his hopes faded away. So he must've lost the will to fight," said Ichinose.

Horikita ended up being the one shocked by this, because of how accurate Ichinose had been. But while she was surprised, she dealt with Ichinose's remark collectedly.

"I see you're rather mean-spirited yourself. You got a report from Kanzaki-kun after all, didn't you?" asked Horikita.

Otherwise, there was no explanation for how Ichinose could have known.

"I didn't hear anything from him, no," said Ichinose. "I mean, it's not like I wasn't anxious myself about the outcome for my class when I found out that Ayanokouji-kun was in the lineup. That's why I can understand very well how Kanzaki-kun feels."

Ichinose, after reiterating that she wasn't lying, explained the reasoning behind how she made her deduction. Horikita thought to be suspicious of her at first, but if she couldn't break Ichinose from that angle, she would just have to change her tactic.

"In that case, that means you don't think you can beat him either," said Horikita.

"To be honest, I certainly thought it would be tough, yes. But, when I started this exam as a representative like this, I became convinced. I thought, yeah, in this special exam, I'll be okay," said Ichinose.

"Meaning you don't think you'll lose, even to Ayanokouji-kun?"

asked Horikita.

Before even twenty minutes had passed, Horikita and Ichinose's positions had been completely defined. Ichinose was in her element here. They were both sure that this was a special exam where Ichinose would have an overwhelming advantage.

"I can beat Ayanokouji-kun," declared Ichinose.

Ichinose's confidence shined through. Horikita had tried to upset Ichinose and leave her feeling shaken, but she had ended up getting countered. Horikita struggled desperately to keep a calm expression on her face so as not to let her quickening heartbeat be noticed. Her sense of security in Ayanokouji being there was replaced by anxiety, a fear that Ichinose would actually defeat Ayanokouji. If Ichinose identified a model student in the next round, then Horikita's Life Points would be reduced down to two.

Now, Horikita hoped to find definitive evidence that would help her determine who the model students were. At the very least, to be able to bring the round to a draw and start over with a new group. Horikita prayed as she stared at the monitor, but she found herself curious about a completely silent Ichinose, and her gaze flicked to the side for just an instant.

"Uh..."

Horikita's eyes met with Ichinose's. It was almost as though Ichinose had anticipated that Horikita would look at her and see how she was doing, like Ichinose had been waiting for it. Ichinose smiled softly and kindly, not averting her eyes. It was an important phase in the exam, a time when it would be strange to look anywhere other than the monitor, which was where she should have been looking.

"What do you think you're doing...?" asked Horikita.

Horikita couldn't pull her eyes away, as if she were enthralled, when she asked Ichinose that question.

"What do you mean?" asked Ichinose.

"Why aren't you looking at the monitor? Don't you...have to look for the model student?" asked Horikita.

"Oh! Yeah, I'm okay," said Ichinose.

"*I'm okay?*" *What does that mean, "I'm okay?"* wondered Horikita. Horikita had tried to vocalize that question in response, but the words

wouldn't come. She instinctively did not want to hear what would come next. But, mercilessly, Ichinose naturally continued on to what she was about to say next.

"Because I've already figured everything out. About who the model students are, that is," said Ichinose.

Horikita, going past having chills or feeling terror, simply started feeling her senses fading. Ichinose's words had conviction, not a single thing she said was a lie. The monitor didn't matter anymore. It didn't matter how much time was left in the discussion. There was no longer any point. Horikita knew that her defeat was assured and outlined, like it was practically fated.

Even so...

Horikita looked away from Ichinose and slapped her own cheeks with a *thwap*. She couldn't let herself be overwhelmed in such a disgraceful fashion any longer. Even if her defeat was probable, she couldn't give up until the very end. If she didn't give up, then she had a chance. There was still a chance that she could bring this round to a draw. For Ayanokouji's sake, the next person in Horikita's lineup, Horikita needed to reduce her opponent's Life Points as much as possible. Horikita opened her heavy eyes and directed her gaze back at the monitor.

"My opponent isn't a machine. Even Ichinose must make mistakes," thought Horikita, trying to persuade herself.

7.3

AS FOR THE MATCH between Sakayanagi and Katsuragi, the first discussion had ended, and they were now entering the second discussion. Katsuragi had reduced Sakayanagi's Life Points down to nine thanks to nominating a student as a position holder, but he continued to get beaten down one-sidedly after that, and before he knew it, Katsuragi was down to his last Life Point.

“Phew...”

Katsuragi took a single deep breath and examined his choices. Would he pass and bet on the next round, or would he make it a sink-or-swim moment and go for the counter? There was little information that he was able to glean from the discussion, and if he were playing it by the book, the standard option would be to wait and see. However, the person sitting beside him was his sworn enemy and the biggest threat: Sakayanagi. If she nominated a student with a position or a model student, then defeat would be inescapable.

Katsuragi would need to secure a draw or better to ensure that he could go into the next round and beyond. The only information he had right now was that there was one more model student left. With the denominator decreasing now, if Katsuragi was going to be reckless, this would be the time to do it, but...

Katsuragi was considering delivering a blow, so that he could strike back.

“It would seem that something has been troubling you for quite a while now,” remarked Sakayanagi.

“If you’ve found something, just go ahead and make your nomination,” replied Katsuragi.

Katsuragi was constantly checking to make sure that Sakayanagi’s fingers weren’t moving. Her tablet was placed on her lap.

“I have only been competing in this exam as a representative for a short time, but there is something I have figured out,” announced Sakayanagi.

“Something you figured out?” repeated Katsuragi.

Katsuragi, who wanted to get some kind of clue to function as a starting point, no matter what it was, deliberately chose to reply to Sakayanagi’s words.

“When you are making a nomination, you essentially have to tap on the student’s name, then, you tap on either position holder or a role you can choose, and then finally, either ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to confirm your decision. Which means you have to tap three times. Additionally, when passing, you are likewise required to tap three times. First, by pressing the pass button, then confirmation, and then again for final confirmation,” said Sakayanagi.

“It’s likely a measure to prevent your opponent from discovering whether you have chosen to nominate or pass with a sidelong glance,” reasoned Katsuragi.

Supposing the number of presses were different, such as three times for nomination and two times for passing, you would know that a student made a nomination once they finished tapping three times, even if you couldn’t see their screen.

“You are likely exactly right about that—that the school has taken care to ensure that we would not see whether our opponents have chosen to nominate someone or chosen to pass. That is why they had applied an anti-peeking film as well,” said Sakayanagi.

“That’s obvious. What’s your point?” asked Katsuragi.

“School officials are certainly doing a thorough job of preventing fraudulent activity, but did you ever notice that there actually is a way to know in advance, and with certainty, what the other party’s choice was?” asked Sakayanagi.

“...What?” asked Katsuragi.

While it sounded like an absurd, hard-to-believe story, if it were true, then that was something that couldn’t be overlooked. Katsuragi stared intently at Sakayanagi, feeling the saliva filling his mouth.

“Then please allow me to tell you. The method is actually quite plain and simple,” said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi gently tapped the screen twice to operate it as she spoke, then held either end of the tablet in her hands and turned it toward Katsuragi.

“Wh—”

Her screen, which was facing straight at him and was clearly visible, showed Sawada’s name and the notation for model student.

“You see? By doing this, the other party’s choices are laid completely bare, wouldn’t you say?” said Sakayanagi.

As she said that, she pressed the “Yes” button on her screen while still holding it facing Katsuragi, confirming her choice. She then placed the tablet down on the desk as if to say she no longer had any use for it.

“What are you playing at?” asked Katsuragi.

“You did not seem to know who the model student was despite

your best efforts, Katsuragi-kun. Since we have made it this far, why don't we enjoy the competition a little more?" said Sakayanagi.

If Sakayanagi's choice was correct, then at the very least, Katsuragi would need to nominate the same model student in order to survive the round. If Sakayanagi was correct, then any other choice would mean defeat. However, if this were a bluff, then both sides would lose at least one point as a result of the selection error.

"You saw my answer. Is that not much easier?" asked Sakayanagi.

Of course, Sakayanagi understood what kind of mental state this action would bring about for her opponent.

"Is this a lie to lure me out?" asked Katsuragi.

What Sakayanagi wanted to avoid right now was for Katsuragi to make a do-or-die bid to nominate the model student and get it right. If three or more points were lost as a result, she thought the best course of action was to rope Katsuragi in with a false nomination to defeat him. Katsuragi concluded that if that was true, then this sequence of actions made sense.

"A lie? That is most upsetting. You ought to accept people's kindness wholeheartedly," said Sakayanagi.

"Sorry, but I won't fall for that trick," replied Katsuragi.

Katsuragi chose to pass, stifling any feelings of hesitation that might have arisen in him. If his opponent self-destructed, then he might be able to inflict considerable damage in the next round. He tapped his tablet three times and confirmed his choice to pass. Tossing his opponent's scheme aside, Katsuragi decided to stick with a safe, reliable defense.

"Sakayanagi-san identified Sawada-san as the model student, so Katsuragi-kun loses three Life Points. Now that Katsuragi-kun's Life Points have been depleted, we ask that he please leave the room at this time."

A merciless, unfeeling announcement was made.

"What nonsense. Do you mean to say you gave me the correct answer? What benefit could there possibly have been for you?!" snapped Katsuragi.

"There was merit in doing so. You may have inferred that I wanted to win quickly, even if it meant shaving off my own points, but that was a mistake to begin with. Do you honestly think I would be

willing to lose even one Life Point to you, Katsuragi-kun? I had disclosed my answer because I would rather avoid getting hurt. If we had arrived at the same answer and it ended in a draw, we would carry over into the next round,” said Sakayanagi.

“How would that be to your advantage?” asked Katsuragi.

“Your strategy is to launch a frontal assault. The more the denominator shrinks, the more likely you are to switch to a suicide attack, fully prepared to lose. It would be no fun for me to lose my Life Points in such a boring manner,” replied Sakayanagi.

Even though Sakayanagi was confident in her ability to see through her opponents, she wasn’t all-powerful. If the discussion dragged on, with the denominator shrinking over time, it was conceivable that Katsuragi could launch a successful suicide attack. On the other hand, if the number of model students was reduced to zero and Sakayanagi could bring things to a draw, then a new discussion would begin, starting from round one. It was highly likely that the representatives would wait and see how things played out until they got more information over two or three rounds. A strategy in which Sakayanagi saw through Katsuragi’s thinking from start to finish. Katsuragi, having reached the end of his tether and at his wit’s end, leaned back in his chair, drained.

“I would say that you fought very well,” Sakayanagi said. “You even managed to take one Life Point away from me even though you are in the center position.”

Katsuragi had defeated the rival vanguard and center while losing only one point himself in the process. He had even succeeded in taking away one point from Sakayanagi, but afterward, he lost against Sakayanagi round after round successively, and he was defeated. His goal of getting his revenge had ended in vain, and all too quickly. Should he think that was simply a matter of not having luck on his side, or was there a substantial difference in ability between them? Katsuragi, openly showing his frustration, was strongly reminded that it was the latter, at least.

“Katsuragi-kun, please exit the room immediately.”

As that announcement echoed throughout the room, Katsuragi slowly stood up.

“I would have liked to have reduced your Life Points a little more,

but it was my fault for getting caught up in the situation,” said Katsuragi.

“I am glad to see that you are able to calmly analyze the cause of your own defeat,” replied Sakayanagi.

Katsuragi, biting his lip, started to walk out of the room when Sakayanagi called out to him.

“You seem to have become much livelier than when we were in the same class together,” she said. “Despite the fact that, because Ryuen-kun and I are both the same sort of aggressive type, you and he ought to be fundamentally incompatible.”

“You make it sound as though I’m a good match for Ryuen, from the way you’re speaking. I would like for you to amend that statement,” replied Katsuragi.

“It cannot be helped that things appear that way.”

“I cannot accept that,” spat Katsuragi, exiting the room as the loser, leaving only those brief words.

Class A and Class C were finally about to have a showdown between generals.

7.4

THE MONITOR in the waiting room displayed new information. It seemed that the battle between Horikita and Ichinose had been settled in short order, apparently.

Results

Class 2-B Center

Representative Name: Horikita Suzune – Remaining Life: Zero

Class 2-D General

Representative Name: Ichinose Honami – Remaining Life: Ten

Class 2-B General

Representative Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, please begin your turn promptly.

Interval – Time Remaining: 10:00

So Horikita lost to Ichinose. There was a possibility that the match could have been prolonged, but judging from the results and the amount of time taken, it seemed to have been a complete and utter defeat.

“If only I had fought a little better...” Yousuke sighed deeply from his seat next to mine, having been watching the situation closely.

“No, that would have made little difference. It can’t be mere coincidence that Horikita lost so completely. This special exam isn’t entirely free of an element of luck, sure, but in nominating, there are concepts of coming to a draw or offsetting changes. These results purely show that Horikita just wasn’t as quick as Ichinose,” I replied.

Hypothetically, even if Yousuke had beaten Hamaguchi and Kanzaki, the results probably would have been similar.

“So, that’s just how strong of an opponent Ichinose-san is?” asked Yousuke.

“Yes. For this special exam, she is, without a doubt, the most formidable foe,” I replied.

“Yeah... Do you think we have a chance to win?” he asked.

“I’m not so sure. Anyway, I don’t want to waste time. I’m going to go see Horikita,” I replied.

“Okay. Do your best,” said Yousuke.

When I exited the waiting room, Ryuen soon followed after me, stepping out into the hallway.

“The bathroom’s the other way,” I remarked.

“Man, she lost all too quickly too, eh? Guess you guys made the right call, not lettin’ her take the general position,” said Ryuen, ignoring my comment in order to muse on the results from our class’s battle.

“Did you come after me all the way here just to say that?” I asked.

“Nah, not really. Anyway, you guys fought hard enough. I think

it'd be totally understandable that you'd lose. Ichinose seems to be a real tough opponent for this," said Ryuen.

Apparently, his warning had proven to be correct, or so he wanted to say.

"Y'know, it's like what they say: A cornered rat'll bite a cat. Just as I expected, Suzune got bitten hard, all the way down to the bone. Wouldn't be at all surprised if she bites you too, at this rate," said Ryuen.

"So you were worried and called after me?" I asked.

"Hah!" spat Ryuen. After that short laugh, Ryuen drew up close to me. "Man, sure is a shame that I won't get to see firsthand how you take on Ichinose now."

"You should worry more about yourself than other people."

At my warning, Ryuen laughed once more and returned to the waiting room. I was sure that Ryuen wasn't in a situation where he could spend too much time dealing with me right now. Katsuragi had beaten the opposing vanguard and center quite handily, but I didn't know how good of a fight Katsuragi could put up against Sakayanagi. Ryuen's turn would undoubtedly be coming up soon.

As I walked, I saw Horikita slogging listlessly from the other end of the hallway. However, she didn't notice me and seemed like she was about to just trudge right on past me.

"You're back really early," I said. "I thought you might make it all the way and bring back the general's head."

I called out to her to stop her, and she brought her downcast face up in response.

"I'm sorry," said Horikita.

Horikita gave a short answer, without even getting angry at my sarcasm. Well, no, I should say that answering the way she did was the best she could do at the moment.

"I lost so disgracefully that I wouldn't blame you if you laughed at me," added Horikita.

"But you beat the vanguard and the center, remember?" I replied.

"Those were the kinds of victories where I was basically handed the win. It's nothing to be proud of," she said.

Apparently, she had ended up losing her self-confidence. She was probably thinking so negatively that she wasn't even aware of the risk of lowering her allies' morale by letting them see her in such a weakened state.

"Seems like she was really tough. Ichinose, I mean," I remarked.

"Yes. Even more than I expected... Actually, no, she might be completely extraordinary," said Horikita. She really couldn't have been more complimentary toward Ichinose. "Under the rules of this special exam, she is unbeatable. She has a breadth of vision and a level of insight that just cannot be matched. I was left convinced that she would defeat any opponent in short order, even if they were Sakayanagi-san or Ryuuken-kun."

Horikita bit her lip hard as she lamented her own powerlessness. Seemed like Horikita, who had been leading the class while battling under pressure up until this point, might have suffered more damage than she would have from mere defeat, thanks to the results showing a complete and total loss. There was no doubt that she had experienced a major defeat in this battle, which also assessed one's mental strength. The outcome of this special exam hinged on how I performed as the general, but if I wasn't careful, the damage to Horikita might end up lingering for a long time to come.

"I'm sorry. Really, I am. If only I could have taken away at least one Life Point, then—"

"You may not have been able to win against Ichinose, but remember, you defeated the vanguard and center, and now we've been brought back to even footing. I think that alone shows you fought well enough," I said, interrupting her.

"But...it wasn't good enough."

She didn't actually say it aloud, but I could practically hear her thinking, *"I wanted to win on my own."* As the leader, she wanted to reach even higher as the one pulling the class along.

"I had to win... I had to win for my class, but..." She somehow managed to keep talking despite being crushed by feelings of regret. "No, not just for the class. I wanted to win and have you acknowledge me. I wanted to beat Ichinose-san and then have you praise me for a job well done..."

Horikita spoke of her true thoughts and feelings about this special

exam. Did that mean my praise for her half-assed results actually ended up hurting her feelings all the more then?

“I understand how much pressure was being placed on you,” I said. “Sure, you lost in a direct showdown, but you also had to deal with the difference in point values between your position and hers, and the restriction of not using the traitor.”

“Stop it. That’s just an empty consolation,” said Horikita.

“Sorry, but it’s true. Besides, this loss is a good experience. I think that it’ll also be an opportunity for you to grow. If the same kind of exam were to be held again, you’ll surely produce better results next time,” I told her.

That wasn’t a lie. It was hard to face a big obstacle, but it was a necessary part of the process in order to overcome them.

“But...”

“Fortunately, there’s no one around here right now. There’s no need for you to put on a tough front. Even if I couldn’t see the situation in exact detail, I can tell by looking at you that you fought well,” I told her.

Giving her a genuine expression of admiration for her efforts, I gave Horikita a gentle hug.

She made a small sound of surprise at my embrace.

There wasn’t any need to continue to act tough and keep fighting all alone. Weak people are allowed to lean on someone else for support.

“A-Ayanokouji-kun, wh-what are you...?!” wailed Horikita.

Horikita tried to pull away, albeit weakly, but I held on to her back and didn’t let go.



“I’ve probably been watching you more closely than anyone else over these past two years. I know your weaknesses and your strengths, all of it,” I told her.

Horikita tried to object, but the words didn’t come out. Suddenly, I felt like she could endure, that feeling being transmitted to me along with her body heat.

“You have allies,” I added. “Don’t forget that.”

“Allies...”

“That’s right. You’ll probably experience something similar to this in the future too. When that happens, don’t keep it to yourself, but make sure to rely on your classmates. They will surely be of great help to you,” I said.

As I said this, I gently let go of Horikita and started walking away.

“Ayanokouji-kun... Ichinose-san is...”

For Horikita, who was anxious about the outcome of the exam, there was probably only one statement that could reassure her most right now.

“You can leave the rest to me. I have no intention of letting your class lose,” I told her.

From the moment I had decided to participate in the special exam, the outcome was set in stone. Horikita’s class would win, and Ichinose’s class would lose. It was with that thought in mind that I was standing here, and I walked onward to arrive at the battlefield where Ichinose was waiting for me.

I wondered how Ichinose was feeling as she waited for me on the other side of the door. I was sure that she was a little nervous, and also, probably...

I opened the door.

What immediately jumped out to me in my field of view was Ichinose’s warm smile, just as I had expected.



Chapter 8: Ayanokouji's Scheme

ONCE I ENTERED the classroom, Ichinose, still seated, gave me a kindhearted wave with a small motion of her hand, in a gesture of welcome.

"I didn't think you'd completely shut Horikita down. Looks like you were able to fight a perfect battle," I remarked.

"I got lucky is all. Everything was just going my way," said Ichinose.

I sat down in an empty seat, gazing sidelong at my humble opponent.

"Guess we've got about four minutes or so left in our break. Would you mind having a little chat?" I asked.

"Not at all. That'd be more than okay. Actually, I'd like to chat with you too, Ayanokouji-kun."

I couldn't feel any enthusiasm for the upcoming battle from her at all. That was proof that you could create a feeling of just doing whatever it is you can do, regardless of who the opponent is.

"First, let me apologize for lying to you. Even though I said I wasn't going to participate in the exam, I ultimately ended up appearing as a general," I told her.

"That's okay, that never bothered me. We're enemies, so we can't really talk honestly about everything, after all," said Ichinose, readily handing me not just understanding but forgiveness.

"I really appreciate it."

"But may I ask you one question? What's on your mind right now, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"If anything, I'd say my mind is going every which way, thinking about how I can fight against the powerful enemy before me right now. I talked briefly with Horikita before I came here, but she was totally worn out," I replied.

"Really, I totally just got lucky though, that's all. I have no idea if

things will work out that well for me again,” said Ichinose.

“I sure hope so.”

“Ayanokouji-kun, it...doesn’t seem like you’re feeling enthusiastic or nervous at all, or anything like that.”

“You’re looking calm too, Ichinose. We’re the same.”

“I...am nervous, though. Extremely nervous. I naturally start feeling like that just from being around you, Ayanokouji-kun.”

It was a statement that would make anyone do a double take if they heard it. In fact, even the examiner, who was standing erect with a straight face, had a puzzled look for an instant.

“But at the same time, I strongly feel a sense of security, too. I feel like it’s as if you’re supporting me, even though you’re the one I’m fighting. It’s strange, isn’t it? It’s contradictory, don’t you think?” said Ichinose.

Which meant that my presence wasn’t a hindrance, but rather a help. There were less than three minutes left in the interval. I needed to make the most of the limited time.

“This is probably just my imagination, but I get the feeling that you don’t think you can lose, no matter who you face now. Do you?” I asked.

“I don’t know about all that. But I guess it’s not like I have *no* confidence,” said Ichinose.

“Yeah, that makes sense. But at the same time, I know that there’s one element you’re anxious about. No matter how confident you are in your superiority here, there is a possibility of a sudden upset in this special exam.” I spoke a bit vaguely, thinking it would be easy for her to understand what I was trying to say.

“Yes, you’re right. I think I probably don’t have any idea how to handle the traitor,” said Ichinose.

The system of having a traitor was something conceived and introduced based on the premise of how the school could incorporate it in a balanced manner, to leave the possibility of a sudden turnaround. The assumption was that, if possible, a traitor would want to lie for their own sake and their class. However, that didn’t necessarily mean that would increase the risk of expulsion. Even if someone with brash, shameless nerves risked expulsion and persisted in lying, could a

representative come to a conclusion so easily? The answer to that would be “no.” The moment a representative declared a student was a traitor after they’d confessed to lying, that student would be expelled.

In other words, one student would be forcibly removed from your class. Few leaders would welcome such a thing. The rewards for the traitor were nothing but a sham; the role should be seen only as a job meant to provide uncertainty in the battle between representatives, to give even a disadvantaged side at least some chance. Ichinose, who had a keen eye for observation, might notice the existence of the traitor immediately, but even if she did, there was no hard guarantee that it wouldn’t lead to a development where that student was expelled from school. Even if it was 99 percent safe, it wasn’t 100 percent safe.

The traitor system. That was why she was wary.

“As we’re about to head into the competition, I have one suggestion for both of us before we do,” I offered.

“A suggestion? What is it?” asked Ichinose.

“It’s about the traitor, which you just brought up. Since we’re running out of time before the discussion begins, I wanted to make this clear: Only the student who is cast as the traitor in this special exam carries the risk of being expelled. And that’s fairly reasonable, since there’s such a big payoff for that role,” I explained.

“Yes, that’s true,” said Ichinose.

“This pointlessly places a heavy burden on the traitor. It’s a nasty rule that makes them try to fight harder for the sake of Class Points, even if they intend to confess. And I honestly think that this rule is a useless option for this battle,” I said.

“I’d have to agree with that. I’m terrified of being deceived by the system of having a traitor, and I’d like to avoid a situation that could cause trouble for everyone, if possible,” said Ichinose.

“But, as long as both of us recognize that it’s a powerful weapon, we’ll use it if we’re put at a disadvantage. If you don’t mind, Ichinose, then how about we agree to tell each other who the respective traitors are and exhaust our rights with dialogue so that they’ll be used up? That would be one less unnecessary thing to worry about, for both of us. By that, I mean that we won’t fight each other in the first discussion, but instead we’ll discard our nominations and use up our traitors,” I offered.

“That’s not a bad suggestion. But...the right of being able to use your traitor is important too. Are you okay with giving that up, Ayanokouji-kun? They’re indispensable for turning a situation completely around.”

It was also a mechanism that could allow the side that thought they were at a disadvantage recover from a hopeless situation. It was only natural for Ichinose to have her doubts about me trying to throw that away.

“Besides, is it even allowed under the rules for us to tell each other our traitors?”

“There shouldn’t be any problem with that, of course. If I opened my tablet and showed it to the other class to let them know who the traitor is, that shouldn’t be a problem as far as the rules are concerned, right?” I asked, calling out to the examiner who was watching us from the corner of the classroom.

“Y-yes, that’s correct. I don’t believe that would be a violation of any rules,” stammered the examiner.

I wondered for a moment if the examiner hadn’t expected anyone would try to take advantage of the rules in such a way, or if they simply didn’t expect to be addressed directly. The attending teacher nodded as well, though looking somewhat bewildered.

“Please check to be sure, just in case. I’m assuming it’s not an issue, but still,” I added.

When I urged the examiner to check, they began to ask for detailed confirmation via the intercom on their ear.

“It’s not an issue,” reported the examiner.

“So, we’re both waiving our right to use the traitor, hmm. I never thought you’d propose something like that,” said Ichinose.

Normally, a development like this should have been a welcome thing for Ichinose.

“There is only one reason I want to abandon the system of using a traitor. It’s because I want to make sure that, if at all possible, no one is expelled from my class or from your class, Ichinose,” I replied.

“Yeah. If there aren’t any traitors, then we won’t need to worry about that.”

With less than thirty seconds remaining in the countdown, I wondered what her answer would be.

“What if I ask for a few conditions? I certainly agree that the right to use a traitor isn’t necessary. But if we manage to reach the end of the discussion with the traitor still remaining, they’ll get a reward. So, instead of waiving it, could you instead make it so that we’ll overlook it? I think that would probably be better for my class and your class, Ayanokouji-kun, because that way, we would be able to safely get fifty points,” said Ichinose.

If the proposal I was making was based on collusion, then it would be preferable to end the discussion with the traitor remaining. There were two options for rewards, Private Points or Class Points, but all we needed to do was pick a safe, smart student who would always choose Class Points. I deliberately refrained from mentioning that myself, but I figured that Ichinose would pick up on it. For Ichinose, who believed that she wouldn’t lose if she took me head-on and fought with a frontal attack, the traitor was her sole concern. The ideal development would be for both of us to be able to each use up our traitor rights in a mutually satisfactory manner.

“The discussion will begin starting now.”

An announcement was made. But I didn’t pay it any mind and continued speaking.

“Got it. I’m fine with accepting that condition. I just want to make sure we have our stories straight so that other students won’t find out about this. Colluding so that we throw away our right to use the traitor means we are foregoing a precious means of turning things around. If I ended up losing as a result, I’m sure it wouldn’t be a laughing matter. I just don’t want to have the process occur from something like ‘Oh, I just couldn’t find the traitor,’ basically,” I told her.

“So that’s why you wanted to find out through dialogue, and wanted it to be, like, our right to use the traitor just got used up, right?” said Ichinose.

“Right. So I’m planning to call the traitor out for dialogue during in the middle of the discussion,” I replied.

I told Ichinose that there were some priorities greater than Class Points, and we were headed to an agreement on our proposal.

“We have different goals, but we’ll exercise our right to use

traitors based on our mutual interests. Is that okay with you?" I asked.

"Okay. But still, do you really want to nullify your right to use a traitor so much that you'd offer me a proposal like this?" asked Ichinose.

She probably asked me that because I was showing no aversion to the idea of her gaining fifty Class Points despite being her opponent.

"Unlike your class, which is more cohesive, Horikita's class still has some weak links. I'm sure that you have some ideas in mind as to who, but let's say if, for example, Kouenji were the traitor, then he might betray us without batting an eye. And for his own benefit, of course. Besides, engaging with Kouenji in one-on-one dialogue is likely to be a nasty negotiation. Also, students like Ike and Hondou could get swept up by the sweet temptations the role offers and end up succumbing to it. If such a situation were to arise in the middle of a serious competition, we'd be forced to make a weighty decision, in the worst-case scenario," I replied.

We wanted to eliminate the traitor system precisely so that we could protect our allies. Ichinose nodded strongly as she imagined such a situation, as if to say she understood what I was trying to say, and painfully so.

"I can trust you to keep your promise that we won't fight in this round then, right?" asked Ichinose.

"Of course. Even when it comes to entering the choices into my tablet, I'll show you all of the steps directly," I replied.

"All right, that sounds good to me. Let's go ahead and get rid of the right to use the traitor then," said Ichinose.

When the time came for us to decide upon our groups, I stood up with my tablet and went over to show it to her. While I disclosed what all five of my groups were, I made a suggestion.

"Let's throw out the initial discussion so that we can eliminate the traitor system. So you can go ahead and choose any student you want to be the traitor. It should help make the dialogue go more smoothly," I offered.

"Okay then, I've got it," said Ichinose. "I think I'll have Mako-chan do it, then."

Following her request, I exercised my right to send in a traitor. I

selected Amikura Mako and confirmed my selection right in front of Ichinose.

“Okay, now you should be 100 percent clear on who the traitor is,” I told her.

“Yep. All right, then, what should I do?” asked Ichinose.

With that, Ichinose showed me her tablet, and I indicated the student that I wished to designate, then had her confirm. Now we were going to go into the discussion while knowing each other’s traitors. After returning to my seat, I grabbed on the backrest of the chair and lifted it up to place it directly in front of Ichinose, and sat down. The monitor was behind me, which meant that I would be entering a debate where I couldn’t see the discussion on the screen. From Ichinose’s perspective, my body would also be in the way of her view of the monitor, as well.

“Return your seat immediately. This is an act of sabotage,” ordered the examiner.

“Whether it’s interpreted as sabotage is up to my opponent. As I’m sure you’ve heard, I intend to disregard this discussion so that I can eliminate the traitor. I decided that, to be on the safe side, I needed to show that I wasn’t going to watch the discussion, to prove that I wouldn’t betray my opponent, which was why I moved my chair. So, Ichinose, is there a problem here?” I asked.

“No, not at all. I’m not going to do anything in this discussion either. This makes us equal,” said Ichinose.

A student turned his back on the monitor, which everyone was supposed to have been staring at with rapt attention, no matter who they were. A student who accepted his proposal and looked only at me, not at the monitor. I was sure that for the examiner, such a turn of events must have been outside of the realm of imagination. A discussion began among the participants alone, with no designation by the representative.

“Ichinose, even for someone like you, for whom it’s a given that you’d figure out who the traitor is normally, you ought to exercise your right to engage in dialogue a few times, where it feels appropriate. It’d come off as unnatural for a representative to act in such a way to eliminate the traitor, after all,” I offered.

“What about you, Ayanokouji-kun?” she asked.

“I’m going to call out the real traitor somewhere around round three,” I replied. “I’m going to set up dialogue with unrelated students in the first and second rounds, to make it look like I’m having some difficulty finding the traitor.”

You wouldn’t be penalized Life Points when you called up someone who wasn’t a traitor, anyway.

“Then, to keep things fair, I’ll give you every last bit of information I have,” said Ichinose.

“You don’t have to go that far. I trust you,” I replied.

“No, I won’t be satisfied otherwise.”

And so, after the five-minute discussion ended, Ichinose and I both chose to pass, while showing each other our tablets. I had called out an unrelated student, Okiya, as did Ichinose. We both left the classroom briefly and headed to separate rooms. The first male examiner I saw today had joined up with me and went into the other room with me. I figured he must have been the observer for dialogue.

Inside the other room, there were only two chairs, placed so that they were facing each other. Aside from that, it was just a simple area, with a teacher’s podium, like a normal classroom. Okiya, who had been summoned, arrived as well. Afterward, nothing special happened. I told Okiya that I had called him here because I suspected him of being the traitor, but he denied it, naturally. Obviously, since I knew who the traitor was, I concluded that he wasn’t the traitor.

“Because Ichinose-san and Ayanokouji-kun were not able to discover the traitor, the traitor remains for both.”

That announcement was made once I returned to the playing field. Neither the students participating in the discussion nor the other representatives on standby in the waiting room had any conceivable way of knowing that Ichinose and I were doing something so inconceivable.

“Oh... Huh, so this is how they contact you. Here, I just got this message on my tablet,” said Ichinose.

With that, Ichinose showed me a message she received notifying her of the effects of the traitor, which said that Mitarai was an average student. I showed Ichinose my tablet as well. The second round played out similarly. We each called up irrelevant students and had them speak

with us. Then we each asked them whether they were the traitor or not. Then, when they claimed to be innocent, we made the determination that yes, they were innocent, and after hearing the announcement, we returned to the room.

“Welcome back, Ayanokouji-kun. An announcement was made while I was waiting for you,” reported Ichinose, since she had returned to the room before I did.

“It seems like the announcements are played in other rooms as well,” I replied.

Then, Ichinose told me the second role, and we went into the third round. I could only hear the audio, but the discussion seemed to be going well and getting lively. Nevertheless, the students from Class B probably wouldn’t be able to settle down as long as the traitor remained in the game. After the five minutes of discussion ended and Ichinose and I both passed, I got up out of my seat.

“I’m going to go ahead and take care of the right to use a traitor now,” I announced.

“Okay. I’ll be waiting,” said Ichinose.

If I can declare the traitor in this third round, and then see the discussion to its end, that’ll be when things really start. But first, I need to take care of what needs to be handled. I left the classroom for a third time and went to the classroom dedicated for dialogue. Maezono, the traitor, stood before me, having arrived before I did and waited for me.

“So now it’s my turn, then?” asked Maezono.

“Sorry. I’ve got no idea who the traitor is, so my mind’s just going all over the place,” I replied.

Maezono sat down in the seat reserved for her, looking somewhat uncomfortable.

“I’m sure you’ve probably got a lot of things you want to ask, but for now, let’s focus on the dialogue. That’s what we’re here for,” I told her.

“Sure, that’s all well and good, but...don’t forget the fact that we participants have no clue what’s going on here at all, so we’re all feeling totally anxious while we’re fighting this battle. Oh, and I’m not the traitor, either. So don’t go declaring I am, even by mistake, okay?” said Maezono.

The traitors didn't know exactly to what extent their presence was a hindrance to the representatives. They only knew about the danger of expulsion they faced if they lied in the dialogue and were declared a traitor.

"I know that. I haven't doubted you from the beginning, Maezono, and I'm not going to make a declaration. I'm just calling up my classmates haphazardly because I basically have no clues whatsoever. I hope you'll forgive me for that. Anyway, I had engaged in dialogue with Hondou before, and he said that you're suspicious," I told her.

"Huh? Hondou-kun said that? What the hell? That really pisses me off," snapped Maezono.

"Can you think of any reason why he would say something like that?" I asked.

"Hmm... Well, maybe, but... No, I'm sorry. I don't know," she answered.

"I see. In that case, I guess I'll just keep searching patiently, and go onto the fourth person."

"I think that's a good idea. Well, to be honest, if we can get Class Points from the traitor not being discovered and making it to the end, and our class doesn't lose the exam, then it might be better to just leave things be, actually," said Maezono.

"Yeah. Still, let me just formally confirm it, for the sake of keeping things moving. The dialogue can't end if the participant doesn't make a confession. You're not the traitor, are you, Maezono-san?" I asked.

I repeated the same words I had spoken to Okiya and Hondou just a little earlier, word for word.

"Hey, um... So if I were the traitor, and I lied, what would happen to you, Ayanokouji-kun? You wouldn't lose, would you?" asked Maezono.

"While it would put me at a slight disadvantage, it's not a major impediment for me, and there's no liability whatsoever. Actually, wait, in fact, it might be even more convenient to have the traitor lie, if possible," I replied.

"So, what I said earlier about Class Poi—"

"Yeah. But we shouldn't talk about that too much," I said, cutting her off. "The rules of the dialogue probably prohibit diving too deeply

into this exam's rules.”

“Yeah...” said Maezono.

“At any rate, you're innocent, Maezono. You can be sure that I will say what I think, without hesitation,” I remarked.

As if to confirm my intentions, the school made an announcement.

“Maezono-san, please make your confession.”

“Kay. I'm not the traitor. So, Ayanokouji-kun, do your best as a representative, okay?” said Maezono.

With that, the pledge from the participant side was officially made. Maezono took a breath, got up from her seat, and turned her back to me. At the same time, the examiner also began to prepare to leave the room. I took a deep breath, as I sat there, staring at the now empty chair.

“I am convinced that Maezono is a traitor to the class. I'm declaring as such,” I announced.

That was my reply.

Silence fell over the room.

“Huh...?” blinked Maezono.

Maezono, who hadn't expected to even bother listening to what I would say next since it would be so obvious, looked back at me with a confused expression.

“Huh? What...? What did you say?” she asked.

“Did you not hear me? I said that you are the traitor, Maezono,” I replied.

“Wha—huh...? No, hold on, I told you that's wrong. Why? I wasn't acting suspicious or anything, was... Wait, no, hold on. Huh? If I remember right, if someone's declared the traitor, they get expelled, right? Huh? What? I'm not wrong, am I? That's not what's going to happen now, is it?” stammered Maezono.

It was understandable that Maezono was upset. If the traitor hid their identity and was declared to be the traitor by the representative, then serious punishment from the school awaited them: expulsion.

Therefore, lying wasn't something that they could do lightly. The representative, if they wanted to protect their classmates, absolutely could not do something like conclude that one of their fellow students was suspicious, so this was all a bit of a contradiction. There were appealing rewards available for the traitor, and there was still the desire to lie.

Therefore, it was to the traitor's advantage to lie if they knew that they absolutely wouldn't be declared as such. That rule was a "major flaw" that could be said to be based on the assumption of the belief that human nature is fundamentally good. If you wanted to abuse that, you could use it for unjust and fiendish means.

"Don't worry. You're not wrong. Your expulsion has now been made definite," I replied.

Stopping and looking back at me, Maezono was instantly overwhelmed with emotion.

"Wh-what?! This doesn't make any sense! I only lied for the sake of the class, because you said that you didn't suspect me, Ayanokouji-kun! Don't you get that?! You said you *wouldn't* declare I was the traitor in the first place!" shouted Maezono.

"Participants are given the prior right to confess whether they are the traitor or not and make that determination. The representatives then must choose whether to declare that they are the traitor or innocent. Those are the rules of the dialogue," I replied.

It didn't matter what I said before Maezono confessed.

"Huh? What? Huh? What? O-okay. Then, I'll confess!" said Maezono.

"There's no point in confessing now. Examiner, could you please escort Maezono from the room?" I asked.

I urged the examiner, who was left too dumbstruck to take action, but instead, he said something unexpected.

"Are you really sure you're okay with this? Do you realize that if you continue, your classmate is going to be expelled? This special exam was suddenly modified in order to prevent such a thing happening in the first place, and—"

The examiner, who by all accounts wasn't supposed to have been allowed to interject, let his protests slip before restraining himself.

Distraught like a child, he covered his mouth and seemed to be struggling desperately to hold back the rest of what he had to say. The examiner glanced over at the camera installed in the room and bowed his head as if to apologize for his impoliteness. Judging from the way he panicked, I figured that the way I used this system was unexpected.

Also, considering that bit of information that he had let slip like an idiot, I wondered if there were any special circumstances involved in this End-of-Year Special Exam. There was the fact that the rules were not disclosed to the students until the very last minute, as well as the complete isolation between representatives and participants and the lack of information sharing. Moreover, what stuck out to me was the fact that it was a lenient system, one where no one would get expelled if they did things normally.

Well, let's just shelve that issue for now, I thought to myself. I needed to proceed with the matter before me.

"We will confirm with you once more, Ayanokouji-kun. Are you sure you do not wish to have Maezono-san do her confession over again?"

Surprisingly enough, the school was apparently willing to give her a chance to do it over again. How kind.

"I see. All right, then, would you return to your seat, Maezono? It would seem that I can decide whether or not to give you the right to confess again, so in that case, we can consider starting over," I remarked.

Though Maezono was angry, she hurried back to her chair and sat down. She turned to look at me, her anger-filled eyes seemingly saying, *"What the hell are you playing at? I'm going to kill you!"* She didn't appear to be upset with herself about lying without thinking about the matter too deeply. If it had been either Ryuen or Sakayanagi sitting in front of her instead of me, I'm sure she probably would've confessed no matter what anyone said.

"To tell you the truth, there actually is a reason I want to have you expelled, Maezono. I had told my fellow classmates in advance that I was going to take part in this special exam as the general of the representatives, but I had asked you all not to leak that information outside. However, it turned out that that information, which should have been kept secret, had reached Ichinose's class. How do you think that happened?" I asked.

“W-well, that’s...” she stammered.

“It was because someone leaked that information. And it was you, Maezono. Wasn’t it?” I asked.

There was absolutely no benefit in lying here. It was clear as day that if she displeased me, she would not be given the right to confess again.

“Well, yes, it’s true that...I probably...did leak...it. B-but I didn’t think that it would get all the way to Ichinose-san’s class! Really!” wailed Maezono.

“Who did you leak it to?” I asked.

“That’s—!” she squeaked.

“You want me to tell you the name of the person that you leaked it to? Class 2-A’s—”

After realizing that I had already identified the specific class that the person was from, Maezono exclaimed the name, like she was resigned to her fate.

“M-Masayoshi! I told Masayoshi!” she shouted.

“I see. Hashimoto. It doesn’t matter who you choose to date. But as long as you’re in different classes, there are lines you shouldn’t cross, even if your significant other asks you. Am I wrong?” I asked.

“I-I get that... But, but, it wasn’t like it was a major piece of info in this case! Besides, I have absolutely no idea why Masayoshi would’ve leaked it to them!” she exclaimed.

From Hashimoto’s point of view, if someone were to ask him whether he’d prefer that Horikita’s class were to win or lose, then naturally he’d hope for her to lose. In the unlikely event that Horikita had broken through and made it to Class A, then that would mean Hashimoto would simply have a new obstacle even if he did manage to knock Sakayanagi off her pedestal, and he’d likely determined that the chances of me transferring to another class would go down as well. I’m sure that Hashimoto must have managed to successfully get in touch with students from Class D and told them the news, so that they wouldn’t be too shaken on the day of the exam when I came forward as a representative. There wouldn’t be any harm for Hashimoto in doing at least that much.

“You aren’t the one who gets to decide whether it’s major or not,

or what the value of that information is. At the very least, I'm sure that Horikita must have conveyed that it was extremely important information," I replied.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Maezono wailed. "I won't do it again! It was just one time! I didn't know!"

"You think this is your first offense?" I countered. "So, you're saying that you didn't ever go out of your way to gather a select few of our classmates and spread disturbing information about me to confuse them, and that you didn't pass the information you gained from that to Hashimoto? You're saying that's not true?"

"Wha—"



Even though it had happened at the end of last year, it should've been impossible for her not to remember that Hashimoto had asked her to do that.

"Th-that's... Where did you find out about that...?" she asked.

"Where I learned it isn't relevant right now," I replied.

"Okay, okay already! I get it! I absolutely won't do this sort of thing anymore!" she protested.

"If Hashimoto asked you to betray the class in order to be with him in the future, you wouldn't hesitate to do so, wouldn't you?"

"I wouldn't!" she shouted. "There's no way I would!"

"Sorry, but I can't believe that."

That's what I said, but it was conceivable that Maezono had learned from this painful experience and grown from it. Considering which class she belonged to, she would probably show a little more maturity from now on.

"I won't do it! I've been honest with you, so, please, forgive me already!" she shouted.

"I see. I suppose that doing this any longer would be a waste of time," I directed my gaze toward the camera, having decided to bring the matter to a close. "My determination hasn't changed whatsoever. It is unnecessary to re-do the confession. Maezono is the traitor."

I made things final.

"This is so unfair! What is up with you?! What right do you have to be so mean and unfair?!" she exclaimed.

"The participant confesses, and the representative determines whether they are innocent or guilty. Nothing more, nothing less," I replied, once again explaining to her the rules of the dialogue.

"Maezono-san, please leave the room."

The school had given us an extension, but they had ruled that they couldn't take any more time on this. It was a firm decision that the school would now be disposing of Maezono here. But of course, Maezono adamantly refused to budge.

"Because Ayanokouji-kun has determined that Maezono-san is the traitor after she had denied it, she will be dismissed from the room and

expelled from the school.”

“No! I won’t leave until you take it back!” Maezono shouted after the announcement.

“What you can do right now is hope that Hashimoto will get expelled in this special exam. If that happens, then there might be a way for the two of you to be together in the outside world,” I replied.

However, if I were to offer my personal opinion, there wouldn’t be much hope of a future like that. Regardless of whether Hashimoto got expelled or not, he probably didn’t view Maezono as a true love interest. He simply got in touch with her to position himself in such a way so that he could graduate from Class A. If he couldn’t extract information from her any longer, she’d become worthless, and there wouldn’t be any point in him holding on to her. People who are no longer valuable are cast aside.

“Take it back!” she shouted. “Take it back right now!”

I’m sure that many people would question whether it was even necessary for Maezono to be expelled. It wouldn’t have been that difficult to persuade Maezono that she was being used by Hashimoto and to undo his brainwashing. Sure, spreading sensitive information should be condemned but not so much so that it would merit expulsion. But for me, it was convenient in a lot of ways. I was simply making good use of the tool named Maezono that just so happened to be close at hand. That was all there was to it. Nothing more.

“I will never, ever forgive you!!” screamed Maezono.

Turning from Maezono as she continued shouting, I decided to leave the room and finish everything. I could see that Maezono had tried to chase after me, only to be stopped by the examiner just before the door closed.

Just as before, the results of the dialogue would surely have reached Ichinose thanks to the announcement systems. The question of whether or not she heard the announcement was obvious from the look on her face. The soft, gentle expression that she had been wearing all this time had vanished, like she was a different person.

“Ayanokouji-kun... Why...did Maezono-san end up getting expelled?” she asked.

I was sure that, as a representative herself, Ichinose should have

known exactly what happened, though. She probably just wasn't able to envision the how, even if she understood the why.

"Oh. She didn't tell the truth. So I judged her to be guilty, and she was dealt with accordingly," I replied.

"B-but, I mean, you already knew that, didn't you? So why did you do something like that, despite the fact...?" asked Ichinose.

"Why,' huh? The reason I said I was going to use up the traitor system was so that I could use it to get Maezono expelled. That's all there was to it," I replied.

If we hadn't colluded, the probability that Ichinose would have chosen Maezono as the traitor on her own was extremely small. That was why I suggested that we align with one another and abandon our right to use the traitor. I also had her decide who the traitor would be for her class so Ichinose would have no choice but to do the same for me. Since the other party had done so, the same action was required in order to stay fair.

"We both made good on our promise to each other to exercise and therefore eliminate our right to use the traitor. Ichinose, you even got fifty points for your class by cooperating and not identifying the traitor, so there is no problem between you and me. And of course, it won't get in the way with the serious competition that is going to follow," I added.

While there were some things I hadn't explained, I didn't do anything that would put Ichinose's class at a disadvantage. Rather, you could say that my efforts put them in a better position. However, as for deciding the winner and loser between Ichinose and me, the tables were turning in a big way.

Normally, one would be happy that a student from another class got expelled, but Ichinose wasn't like that. She would probably regret that she had been complicit, albeit unknowingly, in Maezono's expulsion. Moreover, she had even gained Class Points out of it. However, this whole traitor business was nothing more than the beginning. The strategy that I would use in order to win was starting in earnest right now.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Ichinose. Thanks to you, I was able to dispose of a defective product with ease," I remarked.

That's awful. Ichinose had probably wanted to say something like

that, but she couldn't open her mouth to speak. She couldn't say a bad thing about me precisely because of the genuine, heartfelt feelings of affection that she undeniably had for me. Beyond the conversation the two of us were having, the discussion had resumed, but since I was abandoning this current discussion in its entirety, this round was basically free time.

"It's going to be a while before the next discussion, so how about I tell you a little story?" I began.

"A story?" repeated Ichinose.

Ichinose couldn't get the issue of Maezono out of her mind, but for now, there was no choice but to keep moving forward. She probably wouldn't have her spirit broken for something as trivial as that. Ichinose had become that much of a formidable person now. For special exams, there wasn't just one ability you needed to win. It wasn't difficult to imagine how the representatives from both of our classes had fared in their fights so far.

They would have been watching the students' discussion over the monitor, keeping a close eye on their friends' and foes' every word and every move, so that they wouldn't fail to catch a thing. In particular, the slightest change in a classmate's facial expression could provide a major clue to the representatives. Of course, if they didn't do that, then none of them would have gotten anywhere. That was precisely why Horikita had perceived Ichinose's overwhelming ability to see the students as something that made her a powerful foe. Then, Horikita and Ichinose competed, and Ichinose was defeated.

That was basically the same for Sakayanagi and Ryuuken's classes. But when it came to competing and winning here, that wasn't everything. It wasn't just about correctly identifying the model students and the position holders, as has been incorporated into the rules. You could also make your opponent nominate someone irrelevant or provoke them into self-destructing. That was why I was sure that some of the earlier representatives had tried to shake their opponents up mentally too.

Are you really sure you want to nominate that student? Isn't that student over there suspicious? They would try to mislead with statements such as that. If you increased the number of choices from two to three, the probability of error increased accordingly. If a student wasn't used to real competitions, words like that would probably have some effect.

However, they would hardly work at all on someone like Ryuen, Sakayanagi, or Ichinose. Instead, they would become more cautious and may even end up seeing something that they hadn't been able to see before.

So how could you deceive the minds of students who were such leading figures and deprive them of the ability to make normal decisions? If their minds were focused on the special exam, then the answer lay outside of that. It was vital to completely shatter their clear, levelheaded thinking by introducing a completely unrelated topic. If you knew that a part of your body was being targeted, then anyone would make sure to protect that area. However, if someone were to then go after your legs in an unexpected way, it would naturally be difficult to respond to that.

"Do you remember? There was a little incident that happened in our grade last year. When it came to light that a certain class leader had shoplifted in the past," I continued.

"About me, you mean," replied Ichinose.

Ichinose, still unable to understand the situation, found herself suddenly being dragged by her feet into the darkness.

"That incident was partly caused by you, who never doubted anyone, relaxing your guard and telling Sakayanagi about it. But was the story getting revealed to the entire school actually Sakayanagi's handiwork in the first place, truly?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Ichinose.

"The incriminating notes that were discovered in the dormitory mailboxes. Was it really Sakayanagi who planted those? Haven't you ever wondered about that, at least once?" I asked.

Ichinose was silent, perhaps because she was thinking back to what happened then.

"There were a few rumors that circulated before that revelation, though. Terrible, awful rumors about you, Ichinose. Things about how you had a history of violence, paid dating, and theft. I think that it was probably Sakayanagi who had disseminated those rumors, but at that stage, they were simply rumors and gossip, with plenty of outright lies mixed in. That was why even you were able to endure it, Ichinose."

Ichinose's eyes were downcast, but I kept speaking without

hesitation.

“What if I had been working behind the scenes, to give things just one more push, at that time? What if I was the one who planted the letter in the mailbox, mentally pushing you toward confessing the truth?”

“What are you saying?” asked Ichinose.

Even when I explained it in plain terms, Ichinose seemed unable to understand. That was understandable, though. It wasn’t just Ichinose; other students had also believed that it was Sakayanagi’s handiwork. There was also the fact that Kiriama was used to blatantly spread lies outside of Class A, including Horikita’s class.

“You seem to think this is a bad joke on my part. But can you say for certain that isn’t what happened?” I replied.

I crossed my legs, asking Ichinose that question, after she had built up strong defenses thus far. In the past few months, Ichinose had undergone a series of peculiar mental changes. That had created a kind of composure, which allowed Ichinose to move forward in this exam as one of the strong ones. However, one of the underlying reasons for that was my existence, and what if that existence was actually much more cruel than she imagined? What if she knew that I was someone who would betray others without hesitation, and even drive Maezono to expulsion?

“Because, I mean... Ayanokouji-kun, you... There wouldn’t be any benefit for you in doing something like that...” stammered Ichinose.

“That’s not true. Sakayanagi may have intended to just keep things at a level where you would take it as a warning, so that she could use it to threaten you at a later time. However, by forcefully involving myself at that point, I was able to take that away from her. And by helping you, Ichinose, your trust in me would inevitably increase. No matter how you look at it, that is a sufficient benefit,” I explained.

“I can’t believe that...” muttered Ichinose.

“I understand that you don’t want to believe it, but it’s the truth. If you want, you can go ahead and ask Sakayanagi after the exam. Ask her, ‘Was it you who put those letters in the mailboxes?’ I’m sure if you told her what I told you, she’d give you an honest answer,” I replied.

Now, if I just delivered the final touches thoroughly, that would

be the end.

“For everything I have ever done with you, Ichinose, there has always been an ulterior motive. Every single thing. Whether it was that time on the uninhabited island or that night of the school trip, I only ever acted in my own interest. I was merely using you, nothing more. And the promise we made one year ago too...”

Ichinose was no longer sure what was right anymore, not even those words we spoke to each other, confirming that promise, on the bench just a little while ago. Those words had certainly been spoken, but there was no longer any belief in them. The first discussion was over, and the interval before the next discussion had begun.

“Representatives, please select a new group.”

I did as the mild-mannered announcement instructed and selected a group. Ichinose operated her own tablet a moment later, but her expression was blank. But that was to be expected, when things like this special exam had already been pushed into the back of her mind. She had been dragged into a deep darkness. Even the matter of Maezono’s expulsion was now a distant memory.

You could say that everything had gone hazy. The man in front of her wasn’t an ally. He wasn’t a supporter. The more honest and decent someone’s thinking was, the more they would be dragged into the darkness, so much so that they’d be beyond help. I pulled back my chair and put it back where it was. Ichinose’s eyes, watching the monitor next to me, didn’t have the light and vitality that they had held just moments before. Even though she was looking at the monitor, the conversation we just had was probably firmly stuck in her head.

Reality and falsehood. Truth and lies. She would end up thinking about it even if she didn’t want to. People are creatures who, even if they weren’t speaking, cannot easily empty their minds. In fact, I’m sure that the more she turned her mind toward the exam, which she needed to concentrate on, the more those thoughts would grow. I figured that, at this moment, Ichinose probably felt like she was under attack, like her mind was going blank.

Her vision certainly captured what was happening on the monitor, and her hearing was most certainly working as well. Yet, that information wasn’t reaching her brain like normal. That wasn’t magic or anything, it was just the structure and mechanisms of the human body. Her heart rate and blood pressure were elevated, and her peripheral

blood vessels were constricted. Her pupils were dilated, narrowing her field of vision. And the workings of her prefrontal cortex, which controlled relative and rational functions, were degraded. Recovery from that condition would not be easy at present.

In that case, the rest was easy. I could watch the debate quietly at my leisure, make my deductions, and find the model students. My opponent no longer had the trump card of sending in a traitor either. The debate could continue without incident. It didn't take very long before the time came.

“Ayanokouji-kun identified the model student, so Ichinose-san loses three Life Points. Now that Ichinose-san's Life Points have been depleted, Ichinose-san has been defeated... We ask that you please leave the room at this time.”

Horikita's class had won a major victory, without being forced into a difficult battle at all.

Chapter 9: An Awaited Opponent

WHILE IT WAS ONLY BY ONE, Katsuragi had reduced Sakayanagi's Life Points, down to nine. With only about five minutes remaining before it was time to start, Ryuuen opened the door somewhat aggressively and entered the room.

"Welcome. Please, have a seat," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi remained seated as she greeted Ryuuen and politely gestured toward the empty seat with her hand. Ryuuen gave Sakayanagi just a glance with his eyes, and plopped down in his chair and crossed his legs without once opening his mouth to speak.

"Today is the day of your new beginning, as you depart from here and start anew. Please spend your time here in such a way that you do not have any regrets," said Sakayanagi.

"Yer the one who should heed that advice, Sakayanagi," he snapped. "I'm the one who's gonna win."

First, they began by making a show of force. They lightly pushed each other's buttons, to play on their emotions.

"Even if you do beat me," said Sakayanagi. "I do not know whether you are even qualified to go up against Ayanokouji-kun."

"Heh, ain't no one else suited for the job *except* for me. To defeat that guy, you gotta be willin' to get your hands dirty, without hesitation," said Ryuuen.

"I see. So you are under the mistaken notion that you are an antihero," replied Sakayanagi.

"Huh?" Ryuuen balked.

The character who plays a heroic role in a story was called a "hero." Heroes were, essentially, ethical people with high moral standards and values, who embodied goodness and justice, who helped the weak and punished the wicked. However, among such beings known as heroes, there were those who possessed an opposite, wicked nature at the same time. An antihero was defined as a hero who took the lives of the wicked without mercy, who acted violently without

hesitation in search of money and assets, and who didn't fit into the framework of common sense or morality.

"If you are the villain, once you are defeated, that is the end. However, antiheroes are also given the position of hero. In other words, they are also main characters," added Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi continued speaking to Ryuen, trying to convey something to him in a somewhat roundabout way.

"However, you are not worthy of being a main character. I will teach that to you, starting now," said Sakayanagi.

"You're one to talk. Ain't you got the mistaken notion that yer a leading lady?" replied Ryuen.

"Please rest assured. I am no love interest. I am a main character," said Sakayanagi.

It was a childish provocation, but at this level, it was almost gentle, sort of like an extended greeting.

"Is this special exam unlucky for you? Or is it lucky? Because the contents of the exam were not revealed to us ahead of time, it was not possible to prepare a cunningly vulgar strategy in advance. At the same time, Hashimoto-kun, who was supposed to have been operating as a spy and a traitor for you, was not able to function properly. On the other hand, you were able to avoid a competition in a category that requires knowledge and academic skill, which you are not proficient in. That's something to be grateful for, is it not?" said Sakayanagi.

Seeing Sakayanagi smile like that, Ryuen suddenly remembered something.

"You said somethin' 'bout you and Ayanokouji bein' like childhood friends, yeah?" he replied.

"Yes. What of it?" asked Sakayanagi.

"I can't imagine what that guy'd look like when he was a little brat. What kinda little shit was he?" asked Ryuen.

Ryuen couldn't possibly picture it, despite repeatedly trying to imagine it. Not only was Ayanokouji a fighter with immeasurable strength, but his mind wasn't that of an ordinary person. Furthermore, he was able to remove his limiters without hesitation and coolly perform actions that would make anyone else waver.

“I suppose it is understandable that you’d be curious. Ayanokouji-kun is a special person, after all,” said Sakayanagi. Her eyes were squinted in delight, looking as though she was even happier than if she were being complimented herself. “But I will not tell you. It is my own precious secret.”

Ryuuen glared a little at Sakayanagi, who had happily refused to give him an answer.

“However, in comparison, it is easy to imagine your childhood. You rebelled against everyone and everything around you, you mistakenly believed that you were the center of the universe, and you ruled over everything with violence. You dismissed things such as intelligence and reason as weak nonsense. And no matter how many times you suffered defeated, you thought that so long as you win in the end, that’s all that matters, and—”

“Yep, that’s me,” said Ryuuen.

“Heh heh. I am not saying that it is bad. That is precisely why you are trying to fight Ayanokouji-kun a second time. An ordinary person whose spirit is easily broken wouldn’t even have the motivation to do so. I, of course, simply do not have a loser’s disposition,” said Sakayanagi.

“So you think you can beat Ayanokouji? Sorry, but it doesn’t look that way to me,” said Ryuuen.

“That is unexpected. Despite how it appears, I think that I am superior even to him. And to prove it, I must make you, who stand in my way, disappear,” said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi was persistently trying to greet Ayanokouji from above, from on high. On the other hand, Ryuuen was crawling from below, trying to drag Ayanokouji down. The positions they stood in were completely opposite. The interval countdown reached zero, and it was now time for both sides to choose their groups. Looking at the list of five groups on her tablet, Sakayanagi eliminated one group.

That was the group to which Hashimoto Masayoshi belonged. She had also reminded her vanguard and center not to choose that group. As long as Hashimoto, whose betrayal had been established, wasn’t put into action, there was no way he could betray them. From that perspective, you could say that the rules of this special exam were something of a tailwind for Sakayanagi.

“I will exercise my right to send in a traitor,” she announced.

In a contest between generals, Sakayanagi made her attack in the first discussion. Was it because when the match started, she had nine Life Points and Ryuen had ten, which would mean things were slightly in Ryuen’s favor when looking at the numbers alone? Or did she have another aim in mind? At any rate, from Ryuen’s point of view, it was a preemptive strike made selfishly while taking advantage of the fact that he didn’t yet know how this special exam worked.

“Heh. You sure are full of murderous intent, ain’t ya?” said Ryuen.

“I do not intend to drag this out for too long. I will settle this in the first discussion,” said Sakayanagi.

“Hey, didn’t ya know? The theory goes that the first one who uses a trump card like that loses,” said Ryuen.

“Well, then, please allow me to overturn that theory,” replied Sakayanagi.

With sharp focus, Sakayanagi looked toward the monitor, where things were about to begin.



Discussion No. 1**Participants**

Class 2-A

Yanagibashi Motofumi, Ishida Yuusuke, Shimazaki Ikkei, Toba Shigeru, Tamiya Emi, Morishita Ai, Takanashi Kou

Class 2-C

Ishizaki Daiichi, Kaneda Satoru, Komiya Kyougo, Nakaizumi Shouhei, Suminokura Mami, Takarajima Miko, Hatate Kaoru

The curtains rose on the first discussion, which would be an important match between generals. Moreover, the right to send in a traitor had been exercised immediately. At this point, one traitor was mixed in among the students from Ryuen's Class C. In a situation where everyone seemed hesitant to speak up first, it was none other than Morishita Ai from Class A who made the first move.

"Ishizaki Daiichi. First, could I ask you to prove, with certainty, that you are not a model student?" asked Morishita.

"Huh? Wha—m-me?! Why me, all of the sudden?!" he wailed.

"Because suspicious people are called upon," replied Morishita. "It is what police officers and private detectives do as well."

The traitor who had been sent in should have been a concern as well, but Morishita didn't seem to make any mention of that whatsoever. As if to go with the flow, all the eyes in the room followed Morishita to Ishizaki.

"No way, dude... Uh, I mean, I ain't the model student!" exclaimed Ishizaki.

"Then, could I ask you to prove it?" replied Morishita.

"Aww dude, that's legit impossible though! How the hell could I even prove it?!"

"How about this: if you are the model student, you promise that you'll bite your tongue and die later. Well?"

“H-huh?! Stop sayin’ stuff I can’t understand!”

Ishizaki was flummoxed by Morishita’s continued questioning, but Kaneda quickly intervened, without a moment’s delay.

“Please wait, Morishita-shi. Ishizaki-shi, you don’t need to answer her. I do not approve of such heavy-handed methods. Let’s talk about something that can actually be resolved in this discussion. Now, if we follow the established practices of police officers and private detectives, then I would suspect the person who spoke first. I would ask that *you* prove with certainty that *you* are not the model student,” said Kaneda.

Saying this, Kaneda shifted his glasses, and all of the attention that had been focused on Ishizaki shifted onto Morishita.

“There is no way to prove anything with certainty under the rules of this discussion, though,” replied Morishita with a look of exasperation on her face, like she was dealing with an idiot, even though she herself had been pressing Ishizaki for definitive proof just moments ago.

“In that case, why were you trying to force an unreasonable demand onto Ishizaki-shi?” asked Kaneda.

“Because he had a stupid look on his face and seemed like he would give himself up.”

“Who’s gotta stupid look on his face?!” shouted Ishizaki.

“Please calm yourself,” Kaneda said. “To defeat Sakayanagi-shi, it is necessary for us to use the appropriate means. Conversely, defeating Ryuen-shi will be similarly difficult. Morishita-shi is provoking you in order to make sure her class leader wins. If you want to assist Ryuen-shi, who I imagine is fighting on the other side of that camera, then you must remain calm here. If you find yourself swayed by her words, then you’ll be playing right into our opponent’s hands.”

Kaneda had succeeded in pacifying the indignant Ishizaki.

“Y’know, I’ve been watching other people’s discussions for a while now, and I’ve noticed something. It seems like the model students tend to look each other in the eyes. Komiya-kun and Takanashi-san were looking at each other right before the discussion started, weren’t they?” said Class A’s Tamiya, openly suspecting the other students with a skeptical gaze.

“Oh, yeah, you’re right. I felt like that was suspicious too,” replied

Nakaizumi.

Perhaps Nakaizumi was on the same page as Tamiya, because he nodded several times in affirmation as he said that. Even though Class A and Class C were enemies, their back-and-forth didn't give that impression.

"Right? And didn't Komiya-kun look especially relieved when everyone's attention was focused on Ishizaki-kun?" added Tamiya.

Tamiya was making a strong case to those around her that those two, Komiya and Takanashi, were the model students. Was that genuinely what she thought, or was it something to divert attention away from herself? Even though she was new to the discussion, she had learned how to handle things by watching as a bystander thus far. The superior students made full use of the skills they had developed through those experiences to advance the conversation. While the presence of the traitor was a disadvantageous element in the battle between representatives, it was a great boon to the traitor and their classmates. That was precisely why neither class's participants forcefully pursued the issue.

9.2

THE DISCUSSION BEGAN with a surprise attack from Morishita, and then the time came for nominations by the representatives as the five-minute mark approached.

"This debate's gotten pretty wild right from the start, huh?" said Ryuen.

"It would seem so," replied Sakayanagi.

They both casually offered their impressions of the discussion.

"Now then...what do you think, Ryuen-kun? There were a few things that appeared to be clues," said Sakayanagi.

Just as she had exercised her right to send in a traitor preemptively, Sakayanagi had made the first move here as well. Some bits of information that seemed like they could be used as a stepping stone had quickly popped up in the earlier discussion. There was

Komiya and Takanashi, who Tamiya had claimed exchanged looks with one another. Then there was Tamiya, who had spoken up about the exchange of glances, and Nakaizumi.

It was quite possible that one of those two pairs could have been a pair of model students. However, there was no guarantee of that. Without further clues, it would be quite risky to start attacking in the first round. However, if Ryuuen chose to pass at this point, information would actually be disclosed to Sakayanagi by the end of the round, thanks to the traitor's effect. To prevent that, he needed to exercise his right to a dialogue to get rid of the traitor.

In addition, Ryuuen absolutely needed to avoid picking the traitor if he did push ahead and make a nomination. If he made that mistake in nominating, he would lose two Life Points, and on top of that, he would restore Sakayanagi's right to send in a traitor. If that happened, it would inevitably become more difficult for him to nominate students from his own class. Without uttering a word, Ryuuen calmly thought back on the discussion that had just taken place. Who was lying, and who was telling the truth? Though he had temporarily stepped down from his position, for the past two years, he had reigned as king of his class. Now, his true worth was being tested. After using the entire time and entering his nomination, it was finally time for the answer to that question.

"Because Ryuuen-kun has nominated erroneously, he will lose one Life Point."

While Sakayanagi had chosen to pass, Ryuuen had gone ahead and made a nomination. Ryuuen, knowing the risks, had determined that Tamiya was a model student. However, he didn't think of this result as a serious blow, but as a necessary expense. As long as his opponent was coming at him while using the traitor, he had to keep moving forward.

"Unfortunately, it would appear that you chose incorrectly," said Sakayanagi.

"Ain't a big problem. But y'know, for all the big talk you've been makin', you're kinda slow in makin' a move, huh? Goin' second, then?" said Ryuuen.

"Heh heh. Yes, that might be so," she replied. "Slow and steady wins the race, as they say."

Not denying it, Sakayanagi nodded her head honestly. For her part, there was no need to rush. In fact, she thought that it would be a waste for her to name a student with a position so quickly. In that sense, she didn't really want the discussion to progress prematurely. However, in the first round, two pairs of students unexpectedly emerged as possible model students. Supposing even if one of the model students were to be nominated at this time, the other would inevitably be targeted in the next round.

If that happened, then a tie would be probable. Considering that she would end up losing her right to send in a traitor, she decided that a nomination at an early stage wouldn't strike a good balance. On the other hand, Ryuen wanted to either find the traitor or push through the discussion fast and reset it. Also, he was going to be strongly tested on who he'd engage in dialogue and how he would exercise it. It was only natural that Sakayanagi would choose to wait, with the intention of making Ryuen go through more instances of having to think, to make him suffer.

"Ryuen-kun will now be leaving the room temporarily to engage in dialogue."

Ryuen, who had chosen to engage in dialogue in no time at all, immediately moved to take action to smoke out the traitor.

"I hope your war efforts prove fruitful," said Sakayanagi.

If Ryuen made an error in his judgment here, it was possible he'd lose even more Life Points. The person that Sakayanagi had chosen to be a traitor was Takarajima Miko. And the person that Ryuen chose to engage in dialogue was Nakaizumi. Which meant that, at this point, no matter how Ryuen tried to suss out the traitor in this round, he would not be successful. Only about two minutes after getting up out of his seat and leaving the room, Ryuen returned.

Ryuen had asked one simple question: *"Are you the traitor?"* That direct question was all he needed. If you lied to Ryuen, you would face the risk of immediate expulsion. There were no Private Points or Class Points worth taking risks to protect. Since Ryuen had determined that he wasn't the traitor, he didn't lose any Life Points and remained at nine. One person was supposed to have been ejected from the room thanks to a model student's nomination, but it was reported that the teacher had successfully blocked the nomination, and so none of the students left.

After that, Sakayanagi was given the casting information for just one person, thanks to the traitor still being in the discussion. The information displayed on Sakayanagi's tablet showed that Morishita Ai was a graduate. The discussion seemed to be progressing well, and her identity being revealed to Sakayanagi was a positive. If the capable Morishita continued to wield her power carelessly, the discussion could develop quickly, so a prompt nomination would be required.

When the second round began, Morishita began questioning once again. Even though it was impossible to tell over the monitor who was being investigated, the search for a new position holder had begun. When the time came for the representatives to make their nominations, Sakayanagi did not hesitate to nominate Morishita as a graduate. Eliminating her on this turn was a definite. Ryuuken had also nominated Morishita, but he had only determined that she wasn't a model student and avoided unnecessary risks.

"Morishita-san has been nominated as a position holder by Ryuuken-kun and identified as the graduate by Sakayanagi-san, so Ryuuken-kun loses one Life Point."

Although they had both answered correctly, Ryuuken's points had slowly but surely been whittled down to eight because he hadn't been able to figure out Morishita's exact role. Sakayanagi remained untouched by Class C, the class in which a traitor lurked, and Ryuuken was unable to touch her. This time, Ryuuken had called up Kaneda for dialogue, and he returned as quickly as before. Thanks to the traitor, whom Ryuuken could not eliminate, the fact that Shimazaki was an underclassman was conveyed to Sakayanagi.

At this moment, Sakayanagi briefly adjusted her plans in her mind. The traitor brought her useful information, but she wanted Ryuuken to find the traitor before either all of the model students or all of the average students were eliminated. The reason being was that if she allowed the traitor to survive, Takarajima would gain either an enormous number of Private Points or a number of Class Points that couldn't be ignored. The two students who had definitely been removed from the room at this point were Tamiya, whom Ryuuken had nominated erroneously, and Morishita, the graduate. Two people. That left twelve remaining.

Ryuuken would most definitely nominate again in the upcoming third round. His guess had proven to be spot-on, and he had nominated

Shimazaki from Class A as a position holder. Sakayanagi had nominated Shimazaki as well, as an underclassman. By nominating the same students, Sakayanagi's strategy was not allowing the model student to eliminate one more of their peers.

“Shimazaki-kun has been nominated as a position holder by Ryuuen-kun and identified as the underclassman by Sakayanagi-san, so Sakayanagi-san gains one Life Point.”

Sakayanagi had identified the underclassman. Normally, her Life Points would have been restored by two, but since Ryuuen was correct in identifying Shimazaki as a position holder, they were instead increased by one. As a result, her Life Points were restored to ten, and Shimazaki was removed from the room. From that point, Ryuuen had chosen Suminokura to engage in dialogue. Another swing and a miss. The role communicated to Sakayanagi this time was Kaneda's, an upperclassman.

Next was round four. Sakayanagi thought now was the time to make a decision and nominated Kaneda as an upperclassman. Meanwhile, Ryuuen was trying to make a move once again. He nominated Takanashi, who had been acting suspiciously since the beginning, as a model student.

“Ryuuen-kun identified Takanashi-san as the model student, so Sakayanagi-san loses two Life Points. Sakayanagi-san identified Kaneda-kun as an upperclassman. We will also disclose two new roles at random to Sakayanagi-san.”

Sakayanagi's points were reduced to eight, which was immediately reflected on her tablet along with information about two people. The fact that Komiya and Toba were both average students was disclosed to her. Now, the point totals were eight-to-eight. In the fourth dialogue, Ryuuen had finally called up Takarajima, and he succeeded in discovering her identity as the traitor.

In the fifth round, after narrowing down the remaining participants to see who the other model student could be, Sakayanagi nominated Yanagibashi as a model student, while Ryuuen chose Ishida as a position holder. As a result, there were no models left, and the discussion ended.

It was safe to say that Sakayanagi's preemptive strike had paid off reasonably well. Now, Ryuuen had six Life Points remaining while Sakayanagi had eight. Considering their starting points, she had turned

the situation around and taken the lead. The battle was fought by way of silent nominations, with the two representatives hardly speaking during the discussion period.

“You really ought to go ahead and exercise your right to send in a traitor in the next round, you know. I’m sure it would be so frustrating to let such a treasure go unused, at this rate,” said Sakayanagi.

“Who can say?” replied Ryuen.

Of course, the traitor system was designed in such a way to give an advantage to the representatives who used it, but there were reasons why Ryuen couldn’t use it, even if he wanted to. He wasn’t holding onto it as a trump card. Rather, he decided to lock it up and seal it away himself, for another reason. In the next discussion, when Sakayanagi no longer had the right to use the traitor, Sakayanagi and Ryuen would have to cross swords as equals.

Discussion No. 2

Participants

Class 2-A

Shimizu Naoki, Machida Kouji, Yoshida Kenta, Fukuyama Shinobu, Motodoi Chikako, Yano Koharu, Rokkaku Momoe

Class 2-C

Kondou Reon, Suzuki Hidetoshi, Tokitou Hiroya, Nomura Yuuji, Asagaya Mai, Shiina Hiyori, Fujisaki Rinna

Ryuen had chosen the group that included Shiina, someone he had deliberately decided not to select as a representative, and someone who could carry the discussion at a superior level. His decision also included some wishful thinking on his part, in the hopes that it would shift the situation in his favor. Opposite him, Sakayanagi smiled broadly as she looked at the selections for Class C. That was because now, even if she didn’t know how she’d carry it out, she had the chance to detonate the bomb that she had planted.

THE SECOND DISCUSSION BEGAN. At first, this discussion was no different from the one before it, but the atmosphere in the room suddenly changed after a comment from Class A's Shimizu.

"I don't see how our discussion affects the battle between the representatives," she said. "That's exactly why we're doing what we can. Like, this is our battle, as participants. Let me tell you one thought I have. It seems like Sakayanagi exercised her right to deploy a traitor in the previous discussion, but I thought for sure that she would use it for this discussion. We have Tokitou here after all, who, rumor has it, hates Ryuen so bad, he wishes he were dead."

"Hold up, you're saying it's me because I hate Ryuen? That has nothing to do with this current discussion," snapped Tokitou.

"I didn't say it did," Shimizu answered. "I was just thinking that you would've been a good fit as the traitor is all."

In the discussion between the participants, there was no Class A or Class C. It was all about carrying out one's assigned role. However, Shimizu spoke of a nonexistent traitor that wasn't related to the discussion yet seemed like it could be.

"That isn't relevant right now, Shimizu-kun," stated Fukuyama, looking calmer than the Class C participants.

"I'm just saying the thought popped into my head. Besides, from Tokitou's point of view, it probably wouldn't be very fun for him if Ryuen did win, I bet. Or maybe he's so afraid of him that he's just continuing to obediently follow orders?" said Shimizu.

It was clearly a cheap provocation on Shimizu's part. Shimizu peppered his polite speech with statements hinting that he looked down upon Tokitou.

"God you're annoying, Shimizu. Shut up," snapped Tokitou.

"Sorry, but I won't hold my tongue. We're free to speak in this discussion. I decided that saying those things was necessary in deducing who was cast into what roles, in my own way. No matter how you look at it, you're all kinds of suspicious, you know," said Shimizu.

The discussion gradually turned uproarious, and Tokitou, after being provoked by Shimizu, was seconds away from rushing over and

throwing a punch at him. As the person closest to the both of them, Motodoi of Class A stood up in a panic and tried to step in to stop them, but Machida stopped her. Machida gave Motodoi a look, his facial expression telling her that it was best to just stay out of it.

“Whaddya mean I’m suspicious?” asked Tokitou with a glare, clearly ticked off.

Actually, no, he was far beyond ticked off—he was furious. Even so, Shimizu didn’t let up.

“I’m sure you know why, even if no one comes out and says it. You fight with Ryuuen all the time,” said Shimizu.

“I don’t get what the hell you’re talking about. So what if I fight with him?” Tokitou snapped back, pointing out that it was irrelevant to the discussion, no matter what Shimizu thought.

But Shimizu didn’t back down, because he had understood from the beginning that there was no relevance, and had simply set his sights on Tokitou.

“There are rumors that you’re working together with other classes to take Ryuuen down too,” said Shimizu.

“Huh? Really? Is what he just said true, Tokitou-kun?” blurted Fujisaki without thinking, even though he had been listening without interrupting for the entire discussion so far.

“Shimizu’s obviously lying through his teeth,” replied Tokitou.

“Is it really a lie, though?” prompted Shimizu. “Hey, the rest of you. Better keep an eye on your classmate here. Tokitou will definitely betray you.”

“Shut up already,” snapped Tokitou. “What is your problem?!”

“This is a discussion. It’s only natural to barrage the suspicious people with questions, isn’t it?” answered Shimizu.

“It’s got nothin’ to do with the discussion!” shouted Tokitou, his rage rising by the second.

Having seen the rise he was getting out of Tokitou by his poking and prodding, Shimizu continued, lightly teasing Tokitou. From that point onward, a meaningless exchange of words that bordered on abusive cursing was repeated endlessly between the two of them. The other students were unable to stop it and could only look on with

worried faces. Not a single word about who might be the model students or the position holders was uttered over those five minutes.

9.4

SAKAYANAGI, seeing the first round of this discussion ending in an uproarious state, smiled broadly.

“Now then, what do you think, Ryuen-kun? The first round of the second discussion is over, but...do you intend to make a nomination quickly? Or perhaps you were unable to find any information that would help you make a nomination?” asked Sakayanagi.

Wanting to see her opponent’s reaction, Sakayanagi deliberately avoided mentioning the volatile situation between Shimizu and Tokitou, and instead threw out words that sounded like she was teasing.

“What are *you* gonna do, eh, Sakayanagi? Don’t look at me to see how I’m doin’. Nominate. It’s easy, ain’t it?” replied Ryuen.

“It does not work that way. As soon as we proceed with the nominations, more people will be removed from the room. That wouldn’t be very interesting now, would it? Or would you perhaps deal with the person you are concerned about right away? Fortunately for me, I have already used my right to send in a traitor.”

“So, Shimizu is your handiwork, eh?” replied Ryuen.

“He is not the only one,” she replied. “I had the opportunity to speak with various classmates before the special exam, and I let them know that Tokitou-kun could be a potential weak point.”

Shimizu, wanting to be useful to Sakayanagi and to the class whatever way he could, attacked Tokitou relentlessly.

“Unfortunately, the rules this time made it impossible to make any effective implications, but I appreciate him honestly listening to my advice and following it obediently,” added Sakayanagi.

Although the audio was cut off right now, Tokitou was clearly growing more frustrated.

“As for our match, I am sure his reckless behavior will not have

much of an effect. But what about everyone from Class C participating in the discussion and their classmates watching it all play out? Depending on how Tokitou-kun handles things, it could lead to ill will later on,” said Sakayanagi.

In the first discussion, there was nothing suspect about Tokitou, nor the one who attacked him, Shimizu, and so it was currently impossible for either side to determine whether they held a position. However, there was a strong possibility that a desire to deal with the troublesome matter at hand could come into play.

“However...if you nominate Tokitou-kun, I am sure that everyone will realize that you have some prejudice toward him, won't they?” said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi had finished using her tablet and looked at Ryuen, who was unsure of what decision to make. Shimizu or Tokitou? Or the safe option, passing? He made his choice.

After he had finished operating his tablet, he lightly tossed it on the desk.

“Did you choose to pass, by any chance? Your pride wouldn't allow you to nominate either one of those two at this stage, would it?” asked Sakayanagi.

“I ain't gonna play along with your cheap provocation,” said Ryuen.

“So you are saying you did nominate one of them, then?” replied Sakayanagi.

An announcement was made immediately afterward, revealing the answers chosen by both parties.

“Sakayanagi-san and Ryuen-kun had both nominated Asagaya-san as a position holder. Therefore, this nomination will be declared a draw.”

“I see. It appears that you did not fail to notice. In the earlier discussion, Shimizu-kun and Tokitou-kun were unusually conspicuous and drew everyone's eyes, but behind them, Asagaya-san's reactions were clearly suspect. I suppose I am grateful for the fact that her presence was diminished,” said Sakayanagi.

Ryuen was unable to ignore Tokitou's outbursts, but he was watching things closely and with a wide range of vision. Sakayanagi had also made the insinuation that she would pass, but Ryuen had

made his decision without letting himself get drawn in by that.

“But if those two rowdy individuals remain, there will be problems in the next discussion and beyond, you know,” said Sakayanagi.

“Who can say? Look, here...” began Ryuen.

Ryuen seemed like he wanted to say something in response to Sakayanagi’s question, but then the corners of his mouth curved upward, and he turned his gaze back to the monitor. He seemed to be saying that the answer could be found on the other side of the screen.

9.5

THE SECOND ROUND of discussion once again started with comments made by Shimizu and aimed at Tokitou, sparking a fire.

“I do think that you’re suspicious after all, Tokitou. You’re the model student, aren’t you?” said Shimizu.

“I’m not!” huffed Tokitou.

Tokitou, who had regained a little of his composure after the break, denied Shimizu’s assertion. However, Shimizu persistently continued to provoke Tokitou, and only Tokitou. When other students tried to talk, he interrupted them, repeatedly bringing it up: Tokitou, Tokitou, Tokitou. If all of Class A were saying this in unison, that would likely be a problem, but it was only Shimizu.

“Enough already, Shimizu!” shouted Tokitou.

“J-jeez, what’s the deal? You’re a scary guy. I’m simply making an argument is all. I’m just saying that you’re suspicious,” said Shimizu.

“And I’m telling you to make a real case and give a reason!” Tokitou snapped.

“A reason? A reason, huh... Well, there’s the fact that you didn’t hesitate to betray your class, isn’t there? From the sounds of it, you made an attempt to get Ryuen expelled in the Unanimous Special Exam. That’s not something you do to a class leader, no matter how much you dislike them, is it?”

“Who did you hear that from?” asked Tokitou.

He had heard it from Machida. From the way he spoke, it was obvious that Tokitou wasn’t really interested in knowing the source of the story, but rather he was talking on the assumption that he already knew.

“I can’t say. Y’know, there are a lot of folks in Ryuen’s class who talk a lot, though. Anyway, I don’t know how you could even come to school after failing to overthrow your leader. If it were me, I might’ve been too embarrassed to even come to cla—”

“Enough already!” snapped Tokitou.

Tokitou, who had been trying to hold himself back somehow, seemed to have reached his limits and shot upright with great force. Without caring about his chair toppling behind him, Tokitou used that momentum to rush at Shimizu some distance away, who wasn’t showing any signs of shutting his mouth at all.

“This is a discussion, Tokitou. All I’m doing is operating within the rules, questioning people in the hope of finding out who has what role. You don’t have any right to stop me,” said Shimizu.

Shimizu, though intimidated by Tokitou’s intensity, stood his ground without budging an inch. In fact, if he could make Tokitou get violent, it would certainly be helpful for his class, and with that in mind, he decided to continue provoking Tokitou until the end.

“You’ll be the next person to get cut anyway, so go ahead and betray Ryuen before that happens,” said Shimizu.

Tokitou, figuring that if he couldn’t stop Shimizu with his words, then he’d settle it physically, raised his fist. If he took a swing at Shimizu, he could silence him. Ryuen would be penalized, but getting the person he hated in trouble was fine, so—

“Tokitou-kun. Could you please lower your fist?”

No one was taking Tokitou’s side. It was in this kind of atmosphere that Shiina, standing next to Tokitou without making a sound, gently held his trembling fist.



“Shimizu’s pissing me off, but it’s like, what he says is half-true. I don’t like Ryuuen. Besides, I’d be fine with the exam getting all messed up, anyway,” said Tokitou almost desperately as he glared at Shiina, as though telling her to get out of the way.

“In that case, maybe you should just go ahead and forcefully shake me off.”

“Is...that what you want me to do?”

“It is,” she replied. “If you could do something like that, Tokitou-kun.”

“In that case...!” he shouted.

Even though Tokitou had suddenly focused his strength and clenched his fist, Shiina didn’t flinch whatsoever. Tokitou’s intention of making Shiina think that he might actually try to shake her off didn’t seem to be having the effect he wanted.

“Because, you are not that kind of person, Tokitou-kun,” said Shiina.

“How would you know what kind of person I am?” asked Tokitou.

“Ryuuen-kun said so. He said that you would never get violent with a girl, Tokitou-kun.”

“Huh? Ryuuen did?”

“I’m sure it isn’t a coincidence that you and I are in the same group, Tokitou-kun.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think that Ryuuen-kun had placed me in this group in the event of something like this.”

“He did what...?!” replied Tokitou with surprise. But he quickly found himself distrustful of that reasoning. “Yeah, there’s no way he would’ve trusted me from the beginning. So he had you keep an eye on me, huh, Shiina?”

“I am not so sure it’s that he doesn’t trust you. Can you not imagine that he did it out of consideration, so that you could get help when you were in trouble, Tokitou-kun?” Shiina asked. “If he did dislike you, then there wouldn’t have been any need for him to choose you to be in a group for this important special exam and discussion.”

“That’s...”

In fact, while the other groups were being called, Tokitou was thinking that if there was no obligation for his own group to be used, then he wouldn’t take part in this exam.

“We need you, Tokitou-kun. If you do something that causes us to be penalized, you will not only lose Ryuuken-kun’s trust, but you will also lose your place in the class,” said Shiina.

“My place, huh...” said Tokitou.

“You have one,” she assured him. “You’ve always had one, and you always will.”

Tokitou relaxed his fist meant for Shimizu.

Given the state of the room now, Shimizu was hesitant to go back to rattling on about Tokitou. Even so, he thought that he could manage to rile him up again, and Shimizu was ready to fight back if the students from Class C tried to hold him accountable.

“In that case, let’s at least make Shimizu apologize,” said Kondou, feeling they were owed as much for the suffering their class had endured.

“I am not saying Shimizu did no wrong, as the instigator. But I think that he probably did what he did because of the shadow of Sakayanagi-san looming behind him. I think that it would be a little wrong of us to blame him for it,” said Shiina.

Even Shiina was worried about Shimizu’s situation—the fact that he had been set up to pick a fight—and didn’t criticize him for it. Her comment made it difficult for Tokitou, Kondou, or Shimizu to launch a new offense.

“Now, then, we still have a little time left. Shall we get to discussing?” said Shiina.

The tense atmosphere of the room was nowhere to be seen, and it had somehow been replaced with a relaxed one. Tokitou bowed his head to silently apologize to Shiina, set his overturned chair back upright, and sat down in it once again.

A CRITICAL, EXPLOSIVE SITUATION, with a risk of violence and the penalties it would incur, had passed. And yet, in the second round of discussion, that explosive situation was defused thanks to Shiina's self-sacrificial actions. Sakayanagi soon realized that this was not some miracle brought about by mere coincidence, though.

"I see... Tokitou-kun harbors some dissatisfaction with your class. You foresaw that I would take advantage of that, and so placed Shiina-san in the same group as Tokitou-kun," said Sakayanagi.

"Heh, when Tokitou's on a rampage, it ain't easy to stop 'im," said Ryuen. "As you can see, if it were anyone else, they would've just been addin' fuel to the fire. No matter who you sent in to stop him, you'd get basically the same result."

"So why would Shiina-san be able to stop him, then?"

"Heh heh. 'Cause he's soft on women, just like how he treats you. He doesn't have the guts to drive his fist into a chick."

"Hasn't your thinking been to dispose of rebellious elements ahead of time?"

"Tokitou's outbursts ain't enough to be called 'rebellion.' He's just playin' with fire."

"You're giving him an opportunity to grow..." Sakayanagi mused. "You are quite kind, despite appearances."

"It's 'cause somebody, somewhere, likes doin' that sort of thing," said Ryuen.

Using what is in the environment to induce growth in others was a method that Ayanokouji often used. Although they were such different people, Sakayanagi sensed the slightest hint of Ayanokouji within Ryuen. She found that she was enjoying fighting with Ryuen far more than she had previously imagined.

"However, I would hope that the only way you two are the same is having the same birthday," said Sakayanagi.

Ryuen laughed at her sudden, unexpected quip. "Ha! Don't know nor care 'bout that. I just copied what he did."

Ryuen had made good use of Shiina, whom he had excluded as a candidate for representative, and taken the fact that Class A would try

to make use of Tokitou's disposition into his calculations. Sakayanagi genuinely admired the strategy that Ryuuen had taken. Of course, it was not without its dangers, but that was also something unique to him, she supposed. Putting aside whether this would have any concrete effect on the outcome of this special exam, from the perspective of both classes, Ryuuen's side had gained some momentum.

"Because both sides have chosen to pass, we will move to a nomination by the model student."

In this round, both representatives had chosen to pass. Shiina was targeted, and she disappeared from the discussion. And next, in the third round, Shimizu once again latched onto Tokitou, but Tokitou no longer showed any signs of irritation. He couldn't betray Shiina's wishes, and his determination to stick to that was conveyed even through the screen.

"Sakayanagi-san and Ryuuen-kun had both identified Machida-kun as a model student. Therefore, this nomination will be declared a draw."

With a pass in the previous round, the representatives ended this one in a draw as well. The immediate removal of Shiina, who had supported Tokitou, had accelerated the stalled discussion.

"Now that it has come to this, it would appear that Shimizu-kun's nomination is unavoidable," remarked Sakayanagi.

"I was just thinkin' the same thing," said Ryuuen.

Both sides exchanged a few remarks in this round of nominations.

"Sakayanagi-san and Ryuuen-kun had both identified Rokkaku-san as a model student. Therefore, this nomination will be declared a draw."

Contrary to what both representatives had declared beforehand, it was Rokkaku, not Shimizu, who had been standing out conspicuously and was correctly identified as the model student. And so, the second round of discussion was brought to an end, in an unusual case with no fluctuations in Life Points on either side.

The situation remained largely unchanged even as they entered the third discussion, which showed that things were at a stalemate. In both the first and second rounds, both representatives had chosen to pass consecutively, but starting from round three, both sides went on the offensive at the same time, nominating position holders consecutively round after round and ending things in a draw. In the

following round, round five, Ryuen nominated someone as an underclassman and regained some points, going back up to seven. In the round after that, round six, both sides passed again, and it ended in a draw.

“I did not expect your tenacity would continue for this long,” said Sakayanagi.

“I misread you too. You weren’t just all talk,” said Ryuen.

They had each congratulated one another on putting up a good fight, in a battle that was getting drawn out for longer than they had imagined it would. Sakayanagi wasn’t making any risky moves, and in this discussion, she hadn’t nominated even one specific role. She took a non-offensive stance, thinking that something was suspicious. As a result, there were a number of rounds, which ultimately led to the unusual result of all the average students having been ejected from the room and the remaining model students winning.

“Can’t you at least get water?” snapped Ryuen.

Once the interval came and Ryuen made that demand, the examiner hurriedly brought some plastic bottles. Ryuen aggressively snatched one out of the examiner’s hands, took off the cap, and poured half of it down his throat in one go.

“It is important to stay hydrated. I suppose you must not be accustomed to using your head, and it is unexpectedly depleting more of your energy than you thought,” said Sakayanagi.

Her comment was filled with mean-spirited sarcasm, also suggesting that she didn’t need any, but Ryuen ignored it.

“Do you wish for a rematch against Ayanokouji-kun that badly?” asked Sakayanagi. “You cannot win.”

“Maybe not now,” said Ryuen. “But if I go after him persistently, he’s bound to show me an opening at some point.”

“I would hope so, for your sake. However, Ayanokouji-kun is not so lenient an opponent as that,” said Sakayanagi, clearly speaking without interest in the matter and merely trying to assert dominance.

“Yer a nasty woman, through and through,” spat Ryuen.

“Thank you very much,” replied Sakayanagi.

The time for the fourth discussion was approaching and both sides

were serious about crushing each other. In this new discussion, Sakayanagi discovered a position holder, while at the same time, Ryuen had made an erroneous nomination, causing him to lose two Life Points. It looked as though the tides were turning in Sakayanagi's favor, but in rounds four and five of the discussion, both representatives had identified a position holder and model student in succession, ending in a draw—an incomprehensible development. They had both passed in round six, but students once again identified the model student in the seventh round, bringing the discussion to an end. More than three hours had passed already since the battle between generals had begun, and they were about to enter the fifth discussion.

“It would appear that neither one of us can quite land a decisive blow,” remarked Sakayanagi.

“Seems so,” replied Ryuen.

Ryuen had five Life Points; Sakayanagi had eight. They had been repeatedly making nominations for a long time, and neither one of them was giving an inch. Even so, a gap was beginning to emerge. In round two of the fifth discussion, Ryuen's Life Points had been reduced to four thanks to an erroneous nomination. Up until this point, Ryuen had been calmly standing his ground, carrying the momentum from Tokitou as he fought, but he continued to be frustrated. There kept being moments where he just couldn't push the all-too-important foe, Sakayanagi, back by a single step.

Amid this, a single thought gnawed at his psyche. Namely, the reality that his own ability to calculate and predict couldn't surpass that of Sakayanagi's. In truth, Sakayanagi had never once made a single critical mistake. Ryuen hadn't just made a single mistake on nomination, he was making slight errors here and there, which were shaving down his Life Points. He felt like he was being pushed to the edge of a cliff, bit by bit.

“What the hell do you see anyway, Sakayanagi?” asked Ryuen.

“What you notice, I certainly notice, but you may not notice the things I notice. That's all there is to it, isn't it? However, you are very patient. Don't you think it is about time you exercised your right to send in a traitor, so that you can turn the tides?” asked Sakayanagi.

As long as Ryuen was losing points little by little, he could say nothing else but that he was at a disadvantage in this situation. The fastest way for him to turn the tide was to exercise that right which

only he still had. Sakayanagi was puzzled about that point, as she assumed that Ryuuen would've sent in a traitor at a much earlier stage. With Ryuuen's Life Points reduced by more than half, it was entirely conceivable that he could be defeated in the next discussion if he wasn't careful. If that happened, then he would lose without even exercising that right.

Of course, it was only natural that Sakayanagi would want to avoid him using that at all costs. That was why she was going to lay the groundwork for her move from discussion number five into discussion number six and beyond. By suggesting to him that it *should* be used, her intention was to actually make him hold on to it.

In the fourth round, Ryuuen took a chance. Who was the person who could most likely be considered a model student out of the remaining participants? Ryuuen made his move, believing in the answer that his brain had worked out, based on what he had seen with his eyes and heard with his ears.

“Ryuuen-kun identified Nishi-san as the model student, so Sakayanagi-san loses three Life Points.”

Ryuuen had struck first before Sakayanagi and succeeded in finding the first model student in the group.

“Looks like I've finally closed the gap,” remarked Ryuuen, grinning as though he warmly welcomed the idea of a slight elevation in his heartbeat.

“It would appear so. You seem to have managed to identify the student despite the low odds,” said Sakayanagi.

Many of the students were not very talkative in the discussion, and neither representative had any conclusive information in hand.

“Well, no, I suppose it is not that simple,” said Sakayanagi. “For this nomination at the very least, your insight must have surpassed mine.”

You had to recognize it when your opponent succeeded. Ryuuen was a student who merited that. The blow that Ryuuen just landed was undeniably a big one, but the opposite was about to happen in the next round.

“Sakayanagi-san identified Hoashi-san as the model student, so Ryuuen-kun loses Life Points.”

Sakayanagi had noticed the single remaining model student left in the discussion using the clues revealed to her by Ryuuen's previous nomination.

"You..." spat Ryuuen.

"I'm grateful. Thanks to you, I was able to find the remaining model student," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi had found the answer that she could not have arrived at on her own had she not known that Nishi was a model student. With Ryuuen's short-lived joy now no longer in sight, he was at a single Life Point, while Sakayanagi was at five. Both representatives had succeeded in nominating a model student, but unlike in a draw, the situation had developed quickly thanks to the nominations being staggered. The discussion ended and the interval started.

"Now you are finally in a situation where one slip will be your downfall, aren't you?" said Sakayanagi.

Now that Sakayanagi could identify a winning strategy for the next discussion, she was determined to throw down the gauntlet without self-pride. Ryuuen on the other hand, closed his eyes and tilted his head toward the heavens. He absolutely had to prevent Sakayanagi from making the first move. Still, the fact that he had successfully nominated a model student brought him a small measure of relief. It would be a mistake to pass up on nominating like that because you wanted to wait and see.

But there was no way of recovering from this. The faint signs of a surprise victory from behind were fading. *Is this it? Is this as far as I go...?* he wondered. In order to show Ayanokouji how good he really was, he challenged Sakayanagi head-on. Ryuuen had laid bare everything he could, using all of the ingenuity he could summon. But it was a step too far, and the gap wasn't closing. The next discussion would definitely be the final, decisive one. If given the chance, Sakayanagi would come after him and cut his Life Points down by making a nomination, without fear of risk.

Would he have been able to put up more of a fight if he had exercised the right to send in a traitor, rather than leaving it on the table? He thought as much for a moment, but then he also realized that it wouldn't have even been enough to even the score. Based on how she had been fighting thus far, Sakayanagi showed that she would've been able to quickly eliminate the traitor. There was nothing more he could

do. All that remained was to just nominate the model students, who made up only two out of fourteen participants in the discussion, and believe in a miracle.

Even in the unlikely event that a miracle like that happened once, it probably wasn't going to happen a second time. Regardless, he had no other choice but to go for it. Ryuuen had wondered how it would feel when he lost, but actually, he was looking a little bright and sunny. That was because Ryuuen himself had come to a point where he had no choice but to admit that the little classmate before him was most definitely capable, despite appearances. Her ability to look ahead in special exams, the breadth of her vision, and more importantly, the fact that she had put up an iron wall of defense, where she made no mistakes.

If Ryuuen mainly used coercion in how he fought, through a false show of power, bluffing, and threats, then Sakayanagi fought using her own inner convictions as her weapons. When challenging her to a proper, fair fight, he came to realize that there were still many areas in which he wasn't as skilled as Sakayanagi.

"Man, never thought things'd turn out this way," huffed Ryuuen.

Ryuuen had one Life Point remaining, while Sakayanagi had five. No matter how many times he looked at the monitor, the current point values wouldn't change.

"There are only so many moves you can make, no? Why not go ahead and exercise your right?" asked Sakayanagi.

The only way for Ryuuen to claw back the possibility of a victory at this point was to send in a traitor, whom he had been saving. It sounded like advice from Sakayanagi, but Ryuuen saw through that and knew it was a lie.

"I ain't gonna turn the tables by using the traitor at this point. Actually, all it'd do is lower my odds. We've been killin' each other up to this point, but I don't remember fallin' so far that I can't see the battle before me, y'know?" said Ryuuen.

Even if it could become something of a trump card for Ryuuen, it was already too late. Exercising the right to send in a traitor would create a desire to pass and move the rounds forward. It would cause his mind to get caught up in the sweet promises of potential, thinking that it might be possible for him to get by without anyone nominating the

model, despite difficult odds. In other words, it took time to pay off, for the benefits to be gained from exercising the right of sending in a traitor. Once he had gotten information about one or two people from the traitor, he would eventually have to turn a blind eye to them and identify the model students twice in a row.

Even if he succeeded in that game, Sakayanagi would probably prevent at least one of those nominations from going through. Besides, Sakayanagi would likely find the position holders in the discussion and defeat him first. The endgame was truly in sight.

“I see. It seems you still have some wisdom, enough to be able to see through that much,” said Sakayanagi.

In that case, why not go out with a bang and not use the right to send in a traitor?

“You’re stro—”

Just when Ryuen was about to say something half-hearted, a moment of reflection arose in his mind.

“This match... I lose,” said Ryuen.

An early declaration of defeat, brought out by his true feelings. He had resisted voicing it at first, but once he finally put it into words, he felt refreshed. It was unmistakable proof that he felt that Sakayanagi really was a cut above the rest.

“It would appear that you too have seen the checkmate in this battle,” remarked Sakayanagi.



“Yeah. I admit it,” said Ryuen.

“You fought well,” Sakayanagi said. “I will honestly admit that you are a capable individual worthy of praise.”

In fact, Sakayanagi was also sorry to see this match ending. She wanted to watch Ryuen fight a little longer, harboring a feeling that was similar to a parental love. Despite receiving such a declaration of defeat from Ryuen, Sakayanagi wasn't careless or proud. That was because she was taking into consideration the fact that he might be playing possum; or, in other words, that he was trying to turn the situation around by feigning inevitable defeat. After seeing the sharp gleam in Sakayanagi's eyes as she shot him a sideways glance, Ryuen involuntarily blurted something out.

“You're a shrewd chick, all right, who won't even relax her guard after a surrender,” said Ryuen.

“But of course. I will not relent in the slightest until I see the results from the school,” said Sakayanagi.

There were about three minutes left until the next discussion, which would be the last. Ryuen had but one Life Point. The right to send in a traitor also remained.

“Tch...” Suddenly, Ryuen clicked his tongue.

“What are you clicking your tongue for?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Nah, nothin’,” Ryuen had unconsciously clicked his tongue when he recalled the day's events. “Maybe he had predicted that I would lose like this.”

“You mean Ayanokouji-kun?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Yeah. He called me up this mornin’, after they explained how the special exam works,” said Ryuen.

“I know that Ayanokouji-kun had been giving you a look, Ryuen-kun. You were going to the restroom, if I recall,” Sakayanagi said. Naturally, she had gotten a grasp on what had happened, nodding as she thought back to it. “I imagined that there was some exchange between you two.”

“That's when he said somethin' to me. He said that, if I lose, he wanted me to give you a message, Sakayanagi,” said Ryuen.

“I see. So that was why he called upon you, then,” she replied.

Just as Ayanokouji had foretold, Ryuuken had gotten pushed to the verge of defeat.

“Well, let us hear it. What message did he have for me?” asked Sakayanagi.

Whether the message was the truth or a lie could be determined by listening to what Ryuuken had to say. That was precisely why Sakayanagi was interested. However, Ryuuken had come back with some unexpected words.

“I dunno. All I know for sure is that it’s Hashimoto who has the message,” said Ryuuken.

“Hashimoto-kun?” repeated Sakayanagi.

“On top of that, he said it’s a message that you can only understand from this special exam,” Ryuuken said. “I dunno whether it’s true or not, though.”

If someone said something like that, there was no way that Sakayanagi *wouldn’t* be interested.

“If you choose the group that Hashimoto is in for the final discussion, I’ll exercise my right to send in a traitor,” said Ryuuken.

When this battle had begun, the group that Hashimoto belonged to was the first one that Sakayanagi had eliminated. At this moment, when the battle was about to be decided, Ayanokouji’s message was to lead to a development where she would use Hashimoto. She couldn’t help but smell something fishy going on.

“Does this mean you haven’t given up on the match yet?” asked Sakayanagi.

“If that’s what you wanna think, go ahead,” said Ryuuken.

Sakayanagi’s instincts were telling her, “*Don’t accept this offer.*” In this situation, where the odds of her winning were as close to 100 percent as possible, it would be foolish to lower that probability even slightly. However, she didn’t think Ryuuken was lying. It was precisely because she felt that was Ayanokouji’s message that she had grown subconsciously wary. However, at the same time, she desired to know what Ayanokouji’s message was.

“If you had been deliberately holding onto the right to send in a traitor until this moment, then that means you were fighting against me while putting yourself at a disadvantage. I do not like this one bit,” said

Sakayanagi.

“It was a complete failure on my part,” said Ryuuen. “I should’ve used it as soon as I could.”

Sakayanagi was sure that Ryuuen had tried to win without using the traitor, but there were moves he could have used before trying to force his way forward. And yet, Sakayanagi was curious about Ayanokouji’s message and the fact that Ryuuen had not exercised his right.

Sakayanagi was never going to use Hashimoto. That was why Ryuuen had seriously regretted what happened. Ryuuen gave a self-deprecating chuckle and flicked his wrist.

“However, I do wonder what he is thinking, sending a message through Hashimoto-kun,” mused Sakayanagi.

“I ain’t got a clue either. But if I were to speculate, I’d say it’s a setup. The only risk for the traitor is gettin’ expelled, but that’s a possibility if Hashimoto tries to plead innocent,” said Ryuuen.

Ryuuen would nominate Hashimoto as the traitor, and Sakayanagi would call him up in dialogue. And, in the event that Hashimoto went undetected, he could gain a lot of money. On the other hand, if Sakayanagi knew what he was, she could make a decision without hesitation and get Hashimoto expelled.

“He’ll make light of the situation; he’ll think that there is no possible way he’d get chosen as the traitor. He’ll probably keep his mouth shut and pretend not to know anythin’, even if you try to rattle him,” said Ryuuen.

“It is certainly true that he will risk expulsion if he goes that route, but that would be difficult, wouldn’t it?” said Sakayanagi.

The role of the traitor was extremely unfavorable. Once their identity was discovered, there was a high probability that they would confess during the nomination stage. Of course, if the student was being declared as the traitor, but they actually weren’t, the representative would be penalized. But that wouldn’t be a major setback, as the representative would only lose one Life Point. Hashimoto himself would likely consider it highly probable that he would not be chosen as the traitor, but if Ryuuen exercised his right to choose one, he could choose Hashimoto to be sneaky, to try to outwit Sakayanagi.

Even if that were not the case, it wouldn't change the fact that if there was a traitor in the mix, Sakayanagi would consider Hashimoto a target of suspicion and, at the very least, would probably call him up for dialogue.

"He would most definitely confess when I call him up. Since there is nothing for me to fear on my part about making that decision, Hashimoto not admitting to being the traitor would mean he would be expelled from school," said Sakayanagi.

If Sakayanagi had one Life Point remaining and was backed into a corner, then things might have been different. However, as long as she had five or more points, there was essentially no choice but for her to rule him as the traitor, regardless of whether he was innocent or guilty.

"If you have some faint hopes, it is futile. Regardless of whether Hashimoto-kun is innocent or guilty, I will judge him as such," said Sakayanagi.

"I know that. In that case, show me the skills you're so proud of. If you sweet-talk Hashimoto into thinking that you won't rule him guilty, then you might be able to take him down together with me," said Ryuen.

At times like this, Sakayanagi wondered, "*What if?*" What if Ryuen had entered into a contract with Hashimoto in advance? What if this was a trap set by Ryuen at an early stage? However, the details of the special exam were only revealed this morning. At that stage, the representatives and participants were completely isolated, and they didn't even have a small window of opportunity to exchange information. Which meant that Ryuen had no way to draw up a contract with Hashimoto, like a promise to save him in the unlikely event that he was expelled for stubbornly lying through his teeth about not being the traitor while he was, in fact, the traitor.

"*Actually, wait,*" thought Sakayanagi. Deliberately choosing not to exclude such a possibility from her mind, Sakayanagi considered what the real "what if" might be. What if all of the rules of the special exam had been leaked in advance? Putting aside whether Ryuen had offered such a contract to Hashimoto. No, that was absolutely impossible. Regardless of whether Hashimoto were to confess or not, Sakayanagi could simply make the judgment that he was the traitor.

If she thought nothing of it, and simply chose to go with that option, there wouldn't be any surprise victory from behind. After all,

this was not caused by Ryuuen, but by Ayanokouji, after all.

“Let us see if there really is a message from Ayanokouji-kun, shall we?” said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi chose Hashimoto’s group. Then, Ryuuen picked a group at random and exercised his right to send in a traitor. Both of them were acting in accordance with Ayanokouji’s message, which was not a lie at all. However, when the discussion began, Ryuuen closed his eyes and didn’t even look at the monitor.

“It is rather kind of you to go out of your way to make it so clear that you are not playing a trick,” said Sakayanagi.

“Heh, I don’t exactly hate the idea of putting up useless resistance, but I can’t forgive myself for fallin’ for Ayanokouji’s coaxing,” said Ryuuen.

This time specifically, Ryuuen had personally declared to Ayanokouji that he was going to screw Sakayanagi over using his own talents. If that didn’t happen, then this match was already over. Sakayanagi watched the discussion, just to be safe. Although the information that could be gained in one round was limited, there were several people whom she sensed may be a position holder. Then, while at the top of her game, she entered the time for dialogue. With cane in hand, Sakayanagi slowly exited the classroom. Watching Sakayanagi go, Ryuuen looked up at the ceiling and brought his fist down on his knee with all of his strength. He regretted that he had let the lead slip away from him, from start to finish, and that he was unable to catch up to Sakayanagi.

“Damn it...” he huffed.

He didn’t want it to end here. That meant that his growth would end up stopping here. But that wish would no longer come true.

Ryuuen Kakeru lost.

Chapter 10: The Truth Is...

BEFORE THE START of the special exam. I arrived at the bathroom first and leaned back against the door of the stall that was the furthest back in the row, waiting for Ayanokouji. With my arms crossed and my guard up, I heightened my concentration, focusing on my upcoming fight with Sakayanagi. Since the rules were disclosed to us just a bit ago, I repeatedly went through simulations in my mind to see how I should fight. Unfortunately, the fact that the representatives and participants were completely isolated from each other meant that most of the strategies that I had planned in advance couldn't be used, but Sakayanagi was under the same conditions, so that wasn't something to complain about.

Besides, if it had been a battle based on academics, then it would've been no contest, as though the game had already decided at the start. So, considering that, it was safe to say that the first barrier had been crossed. It was especially interesting because there were no absolute guarantees.

For the first time in a long while, I felt a tingling, stinging sensation all over my skin. Leaving things to chance, if I were to go out there and lose to Sakayanagi in this exam, then that would be the end. In the worst-case scenario, there was still the option of holding my revenge match against Ayanokouji outside of the school.

After a short delay, he came over to me. He had a blank expression, like usual. At the time, I couldn't sense the creepy vibe Ayanokouji had about him. But now, I could feel his abnormality, to the point of disgust.

"Seems like you picked up on my call," said Ayanokouji.

"Hurry up and state your business already," I replied. "Sorry, but I ain't got the time to pay attention to you today."

Ayanokouji didn't even move an eyebrow when I rushed him.

"Ryuuen, I'd like to ask you to pass on a single message to Sakayanagi, sometime between the start and the end of the special exam," he said.

“Huh? A message? If that’s it, then you tell ’er yourself. Are you messin’ with me?” I spat.

That chick Sakayanagi was sittin’ quietly in the waiting room from when the groups were decided until just a minute ago. He would have plenty of time to go and talk to her himself.

“It’s a special message, a message that I only want delivered during the special exam,” explained Ayanokouji.

So, he was talking about a message that had meaning once the one-on-one match between me and Sakayanagi was underway, huh?

“Hah! I don’t get what that’s supposed to mean,” I replied.

“It’s okay if you don’t understand. The message just needs to get to Sakayanagi,” he said.

What the hell is he up to? I don’t think this is it, but is it possible that he’s working together with Sakayanagi?

“Relax. I may not be on your side, but I’m not on Sakayanagi’s, either. I’m simply a bystander,” he added.

He added that bit of information like he was reading my thoughts, as I was wondering just what he was doing.

“So what’s in it for me, to help you out with this hassle?” I asked.

“Sorry, but nothing in particular. If you don’t like it, you can refuse. Besides, if the situation unfolds in such a way that you win against Sakayanagi, then the message won’t be necessary.”

I had no intention of honestly cooperating with Ayanokouji, but I couldn’t allow that last thing he said to pass.

“You sayin’ I’ll lose?” I asked.

“I didn’t say that. The message is just a little particular is all,” said Ayanokouji. At this point, he was just spouting nonsense, but he continued. “If you determine that you can’t win, then just remember what I said when the time comes. If you just do that, that’ll be fine.”

I didn’t like this at all, but this guy did see into the future, in a really bizarre way. I guess that it wasn’t a totally pointless thing for me to do, at the very least.

“Unfortunately for you, I don’t plan on losin’ at all. But all the same, I’m gonna ask you. What should I pass on?” I asked.

I was getting a bit curious about the contents of this message that he was going to deliver to Sakayanagi in such a roundabout way. But...

"The contents of the message have been passed onto Hashimoto," said Ayanokouji.

"Huh?!"

Even now, Ayanokouji was saying stuff that just went totally beyond what I imagined.

"So just tell Sakayanagi to ask Hashimoto for the message."

"You shittin' me? How am I even going to get her to talk to Hashimoto during the exam?"

"That's simple," he replied. "All you have to do is make Hashimoto the traitor. If you do that, then you can make a situation where she can engage in dialogue with him one-on-one."

Seriously, how far was this guy going to go just to screw with me?

"Don't make me laugh. Hashimoto's an opportunistic rat bastard that nobody trusts. There's no way that Sakayanagi would use Hashimoto's group in a match against me," I answered.

Using my right to send in a traitor on Hashimoto itself sounded idiotic, but there was no conceivable way something like that could happen.

"It depends on the circumstances. It's actually not that difficult, depending on how things unfold," said Ayanokouji.

It didn't feel like he was saying, "*You have to tell her*," or anything like that, like he was trying to talk me into it, but seriously, this guy was an asshole who pissed me off to no end.

"Yer outta luck. I don't care whether there's any meanin' to this message or not. You're just gonna have to deliver this message or whatever it is to herself yourself after the exam. You should have least have enough time to meet with her, anyway," I replied.

"It's a special message, that Sakayanagi will only be able to pick up on during the special exam," said Ayanokouji.

"You tryin' to keep me from usin' my traitor rights or somethin'?" I asked.

In all likelihood, Sakayanagi wasn't gonna use that rat bastard Hashimoto anyway, but this whole message business would be

impossible if I didn't save my traitor rights for when he was in play.

"It might happen," said Ayanokouji.

"Don't make me laugh," I replied. "Your message'll never reach Sakayanagi."

I shoved Ayanokouji's riddle into a corner of my mind, feeling like an idiot for giving this any serious thought.

"If you want to use your traitor rights, you can use them whenever you want. I won't coerce you," Ayanokouji said before leaving.

I clicked my tongue forcefully while I watched his back as he walked through the door.

"What's the message? God damn it, makin' it harder for me to use my rights for no reason," I spat.

I was about to be forced into a tough fight, and here he was, asking me for the most ridiculous crap.

10.1

RYUEN HAD EXERCISED his right to send in a traitor and there was going to be a dialogue with a representative.

"I've gotta bad feelin about this," said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto, who had already arrived and sat down, muttered those words to Sakayanagi as she appeared in the classroom with a smile.

"Ryuuen used his traitor rights when my group was selected," he added. "This is a bad turn of events."

Saying that, Hashimoto leaned his back deeply into his chair as Sakayanagi walked with her cane over to the seat opposite him and sat down.

"I can't ask how the battle between representatives is going, but by all accounts, we're at the climax, huh?" said Hashimoto.

"I am not so sure about that. Unfortunately, I cannot provide an

answer to that question here,” said Sakayanagi.

Hashimoto was hoping for news of a development wherein Ryuuen had the upper hand in their match. But he felt that Sakayanagi, sitting before him, seemed to have a composed air about her.

“Well, that’s okay. We won’t know the details until it’s all over, anyway. More importantly, why’d you use the group I’m in, Sakayanagi?” asked Hashimoto, changing the subject a little as though he were trying to run away from that answer.

“Oh my. Now that you perceive me as an enemy, you feel no compunction about addressing me so casually?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Because, for the time being anyway, it’s just you and me here, and I don’t really care about keeping up appearances or whatever,” Hashimoto explained.

“Very well. I see that you are appropriately prepared yourself,” said Sakayanagi.

Hashimoto was playing it cool, looking nonchalant, but his heart was beating much, much faster than normal. He desperately swallowed his saliva to try to wet his thirsty throat and pretended like things were normal.

“You have chosen to join forces with Ryuuen-kun. It is unfortunate for you that, for this once-in-a-lifetime match, it turned out to be a special exam in which you and he were completely helpless,” said Sakayanagi.

“Yeah, seriously. I was hoping for something like, by betraying you, I’d be able to overturn the odds in this contest,” said Hashimoto. Because the results were almost the exact opposite, he made a big show of being disappointed. “Why did you even use my group, anyway? Even if I couldn’t do anything to meddle, there’s no way you’d do anything that would provide an opening that could be exploited. You never know what’s going to happen in this world.”

There was no advantage to using Hashimoto, only disadvantages.

“Yes, you are correct. I was not planning to use you for this special exam, as you had expected,” said Sakayanagi.

“So why, then? What’s the purpose of having this dialogue? Don’t tell me you went this far to try to get me expelled. Is that what you’re saying?” asked Hashimoto, completely convinced that something like

that would be absolutely impossible. “I can’t comply with your wishes, so how about I just hurry up and confess already? I’ll say it: I’m the traitor.”

“I would prefer that you not do so, because I am not interested in your confession at all. The reason I had called you, Hashimoto-kun, was so that I could find out the contents of the message that you had heard from Ayanokouji-kun,” explained Sakayanagi.

“...Message?” asked Hashimoto.

“Since you and I are the only ones here, surely there is no need for you to hide it, no?” asked Sakayanagi.

“No, wait, hold on a second. I have no idea what you’re talking about,” replied Hashimoto as he crossed his arms and gave it some thought, looking visibly puzzled.

“You met with Ayanokouji-kun before the special exam, did you not?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Yeah, I did. But I didn’t get anything like a message for you from him,” said Hashimoto.

“Time is limited. If you were entrusted with something, I cannot imagine there is any need for you to pointlessly keep me in suspense,” pressed Sakayanagi.

“No, really, I seriously have absolutely no clue what this is all about. Give me a minute here. Let me think.”

It was true that Hashimoto met with Ayanokouji, but he truly didn’t remember being asked to deliver a message to Sakayanagi. He frantically searched through his memories.

“Ah, wait, hold up... Don’t tell me...” he thought aloud. “Could *that* be it?”

“It would seem that you do have an idea of what it is, after all,” remarked Sakayanagi.

“No, well, I mean, *that* was definitely not a message though. It was just...” said Hashimoto, before snapping his mouth shut just as he was about to say the words.

“What is it?” asked Sakayanagi.

“He gave me one warning before going into the special exam. ‘Don’t lie to yourself,’ was what he said,” replied Hashimoto.

“You are a liar, after all. I suppose that is why he had given you that advice.”

However, that likely wasn't a message for Sakayanagi, as Hashimoto was hesitant to say.

“Right? Honestly, there was nothing else,” he said. “No message or whatever.”

Sakayanagi thought for a moment. It didn't look like Hashimoto was lying about this matter. On top of that, she couldn't imagine that Ryuen was lying about it either. There was no doubt that he had already given up on the exam, since he didn't even watch the discussion. In that case, there was only one answer remaining.

“You were entrusted with a message by Ayanokouji-kun, but you were not informed that it was a message. That is why you cannot find the answer, even if you search your memory,” said Sakayanagi.

“What are you talking about? If that's true, then there's nothing I can do, right? I have no clue,” said Hashimoto.

“There is no need for concern. I will find that message.”

To do so, it would probably require maximizing the time for dialogue.

“Examiner, I will ask you this ahead of time. I will now ask him whether or not he is the traitor, and at this stage, I will only be asking *how* he would answer. Can I please ask that you not take what he says to be his official confession?”

After informing the examiner that she did not want the confession yet, Sakayanagi confronted Hashimoto.

“Can you tell me if you are the traitor or not?”

Hashimoto glanced at the examiner. The examiner nodded slightly in agreement, promising that anything said for now would not be taken as a confession either way, whether innocent or guilty.

“What are you after?” asked Hashimoto.

“I just thought I would like to speak with you. You said something earlier, didn't you? You said that Ayanokouji-kun told you not to lie to yourself. Please allow me to confirm whether that is true. If you are on Ryuen-kun's side, then there should only be one answer here.”

“I'm not going to just carelessly believe you, no matter how many

times you've made an announcement to the examiner. So, let me put it this way: If you ask me to confess right now, I might say that I'm not the traitor," said Hashimoto, providing himself some insurance by being vague and noncommittal.

"I see. Then you were simply called here, even though you were cast into a different role. Is that right?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Yeah. I'll tell you how I really feel," said Hashimoto.

"I do not mind that stance. I feel that if you can tell me what is really on your mind, then I can get to the message. Shall we have a short chat then, before we get to the confession?"

Immediately after that, a one-on-one conversation between Hashimoto and Sakayanagi began to unfold, unrelated to the special exam.

"What do you want to ask me?" asked Hashimoto.

"Please allow me to ask you something that I could not ask the you from before. The old me would not have been interested in such things, but I believe that your character and thoughts are built upon your past experiences, Hashimoto-kun," said Sakayanagi.

"Who can say? Maybe that's true, maybe it isn't."

"Even if you are not going so far as to lie, are you unwilling to simply answer the question?"

"We don't have the kind of relationship where we could talk about the past with each other."

"Well, then, perhaps I will go ahead and take a few guesses myself," Sakayanagi said. "I thoroughly investigate both allies and enemies, and you must be aware that you have some strange bad habits. Whenever you have a problem or are worried about something, you tend to shut yourself away in a bathroom stall."

When Sakayanagi pointed that out, Hashimoto's shoulders suddenly twitched at the thought that Sakayanagi, sitting across from him, knew about a habit that he had no intention of letting anyone find out about.

"Wow, that's a major surprise, for sure..." he said. "How and when did you find that out?"

"I believe you may have already realized her identity, but I have

had Yamamura-san investigate a number of things for me, for quite a long time. That is how I know you have been in contact with Ryuen-kun on a regular basis and that you have spent a lot of time with him," explained Sakayanagi.

"In that case, does that mean you also had Yamamura trespass into the men's bathrooms?"

"Thinking back on it now, I suppose that I did force her to do some difficult things," Sakayanagi said, not denying it but instead nodding in acknowledgment of the fact. "You shut yourself away in bathroom stalls when you have no business to do in there. Either you want some time alone to think, or that is a place where you can escape from reality. I suspect it's the latter. I do not know if it was while you were in primary school or in junior high school, but I am sure there must have been some event that created that behavior. And, if we factor in your personality...there are things that become clear."

Hashimoto responded to Sakayanagi cutting to the core of him with perfunctory applause and chuckled to himself as he filled in the blanks for her.

"It's not that unusual a story," he said. "A long time ago, I used to get chased around by people who didn't like me. A lot. And, on the campus of the school I went to, there was this bathroom that was so dirty no one would go near it. I would hole up in there and do a lot of thinking by myself. I just haven't been able to shake that habit is all."

He could have lied, but he figured he'd tell the truth since it was just about this. Even if Ayanokouji had advised him to do so. He didn't want to displease Sakayanagi by being thoughtless.

"You speak so optimistically cheerfully when you say that, but your past was quite painful, wasn't it?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Who can say?" replied Hashimoto, dodging the question. Because, if he had answered it, it naturally would have dug up unpleasant memories.

"You had realized something through those experiences. You came to believe that it was right to betray others before you were betrayed yourself, and you learned that the art of survival was to lie in order to win. That is Hashimoto Masayoshi."

"Don't talk like you know. Don't show me you understand, as someone who has never seen hell before," spat Hashimoto. Slightly

overcome with anger, he reflexively smacked his knee. "I don't know what Ayanokouji's message is, but it's got nothing to do with me. I *have* to graduate from Class A. I need results. Results that'll show those people who think that I'm nothing but a piece of shit that they're wrong."

Sakayanagi, Ryuen, Ayanokouji. Hashimoto didn't care, no matter who it was. He was going to graduate from Class A. With only that goal in mind, Hashimoto continued to fight.

"Enough of this already. Let's just move onto my confession," said Hashimoto.

"What will you do once we move onto the confession? You were told not to lie to yourself, and so now, you will confess that you're not on Ryuen-kun's side and that you are the traitor. Is that what you're intending?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Obviously," Hashimoto replied. "If I say that I'm not the traitor, even as a joke, you'll declare that I am the traitor and get me expelled, acting all high and mighty over nothing, like you slayed some great beast. There is no way I am going to let something like that happen."

"Yes. I will not promise something like 'I will not make that judgment, no matter what you say,' either, of course. My answer to you is a definitive one: I will judge you as such," said Sakayanagi.

"In that case, then this conversation is over. I—"

Hashimoto, who had tried to bring this dialogue to an end himself, went speechless as he looked into Sakayanagi's eyes.

"What? Why are you making that face?" he asked.

Sakayanagi was wearing a calm, gentle expression, which he had never seen on her before. It wasn't the kind of face someone made when they were mocking another person but a warm smile, like a mother looking over her child.

"Maybe it is because my understanding of you has deepened, Hashimoto-kun," Sakayanagi said. "I promised Masumi-san that I would have you expelled. But...just now, I thought that it might be a good idea for me to reconsider that."

"Huh? There is no way I could believe that," said Hashimoto.

"I did not say that I would rescind it. If you are going to continue to betray the class, then the consequences are not over. But if you trust

me and follow me, then things will be different. That is all that I am saying,” said Sakayanagi.

“Do you really think I’ll believe that?” Hashimoto shot back. “Of course you’ll betray me.”

“I am not so sure about that,” said Sakayanagi.

“You’re gonna trick me, catch me off guard, and then retaliate. Aren’t you?”

“Hashimoto-kun, please give it some thought.”

“You’ll obviously betray me. Definitely. I...have to defeat you...”

Suddenly, a droplet of water trailed down Hashimoto’s cheek.

“What is...?” said Hashimoto.

He didn’t even understand it himself, it was just so sudden. It was only when he wiped it away that he realized it was a tear.

“What the hell is this? There’s no reason to cry, so what’s going on?” he asked with a helpless laugh at the physical abnormality going on with his body.



“There hasn’t ever been anyone who has understood you before. You had thought that there still wouldn’t be anyone in the future, as well. However, your instincts have made you come to realize that is not true, isn’t that right?” asked Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi, looking at Hashimoto before her, also thought back on herself. She had never trusted anyone before either. She had trusted only her own thoughts, and acted coldly, without emotion. However, as a result, she had lost Kamuro due to their immature hearts.

Hashimoto was carrying a darkness within him. A past that made him into someone who would do whatever it takes, fair or foul, in order to survive, going this way and that. If Sakayanagi got even closer to Hashimoto in the coming future, then a day might come where he would tell her about it. That was what Sakayanagi thought, at least. While it didn’t change the fact that he was a man that was hard to forgive, she was also largely responsible for Kamuro’s expulsion herself.

In that case, maybe she should give him a chance. Maybe she should win this special exam and once again bring Hashimoto over to her side, as an ally. Such thoughts were swirling about in Sakayanagi’s mind. Hashimoto would confess and admit to being a traitor. In that case, all that was left was for Sakayanagi to make her decision, and that would be the end of the dialogue.

Hashimoto would only lose his rewards. They would return to the discussion, she would find a position holder, and this special exam would end with Ryuuen’s Life Points being shaved down. However...

Sakayanagi stopped.

What was it that Ayanokouji wanted to tell her?

What was the message that he had conveyed to Hashimoto? Was it a message telling her to forgive the man before her? While she had arrived at one possible answer, Sakayanagi still felt a strong sense that something was out of place. She quietly closed her eyes. That was not the message from Ayanokouji. The question of whether or not to forgive Hashimoto did not have to be answered through this special exam. It could even be answered after Ryuuen’s expulsion from the school had been made definite, not during the ambiguous phase. Therefore, you couldn’t say that the message would be meaningless if it wasn’t delivered now.

What was it that he wanted to tell her in this situation? She

explored the idea, using her superior thinking that others did not possess. Thinking. Thinking. Thinking. Thinking. Thinking.

“Ah!”

Finally, Sakayanagi’s thoughts lead her to the answer, the hidden message.

“Is that...what you mean?” she thought aloud.

No. I do not want to accept it. I do not want to accept such a message, she thought. That was why she added a question mark. But even after turning it into a question, her brain couldn’t help but be convinced that it was indeed the correct answer. What was the message that Ayanokouji had sent to Sakayanagi? The message was something that Ryuen and Hashimoto could never hear. Ayanokouji’s true intentions, which could only be seen after fighting with Ryuen.

It was a message that was far, far too cruel for Sakayanagi.

“He’s...a liar too,” said Sakayanagi.

A fight between Sakayanagi and Ryuen, with expulsion at stake. Their true intentions, Sakayanagi and Ryuen’s, were to fight against Ayanokouji to their hearts’ content. So this contest was something that they established in order to eliminate the opponent that stood in their way. And Ayanokouji, knowing this, decided that he wouldn’t support either side. However, while he gave that answer, he actually did make a decision about which of them it was that he wanted to remain.

Ayanokouji’s intended opponent was Ryuen Kakeru.

Of course, Ayanokouji wouldn’t have wanted to interfere with this match, naturally. For that purpose, he had even offered her advice, implying that he would repay the debt he owed her, but it was only done as pretext, because he knew that Sakayanagi would have refused. The whole sequence of events was an insignificant help in turning the tables for Ryuen, who was now facing imminent defeat.

The real battle with Ayanokouji awaited her ahead, the thing that Sakayanagi had been waiting for, for so long. But what did Ayanokouji think? She knew that he was working on the premise of having the four classes in equilibrium. She even interfered with Ayanokouji’s plans because she wanted to see his troubled face. However, the underlying

reason behind what Ayanokouji was doing was because he was hoping and waiting for a decisive battle to come. Sakayanagi had believed and hoped that she was a worthy opponent for him.

In the end though, that was nothing more than a one-sided wish on her part. It was a certain future that only Sakayanagi, who possessed a superior mind, could see. Ayanokouji wanted to continue to watch Ryuen's growth closely and accept his challenge. Just like how Sakayanagi herself felt that she had wanted to have more fun with Ryuen in this battle.

Delivering the final blow to Ryuen would be simple. With just one more push, her victory would be assured. Then, Sakayanagi could say, "I interfered with your plans once again," and state her desire for a fight.

However...how comical a sight this was.

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka didn't want to fight Sakayanagi Arisu in the future.

The reality was that Ayanokouji would not be pleased if Sakayanagi won here and now. For the first time in her life, Sakayanagi felt she hated this thinking of hers, which enabled her to see beyond where others could see, which no one else could see yet. She had wanted to remain ignorant and unaware of how ridiculous she was.

If she wanted to help her class, she would have to prioritize winning. Images of Yamamura and her classmates flashed through her mind for a moment. There might have even been a future where she could have fulfilled her promise to Kamuro or join hands with Hashimoto once again. It wouldn't be a bad thing at all to continue her life at this school. But beyond that, "what Sakayanagi wanted," wasn't waiting for her. For Sakayanagi, that was a painful reality, and one that could not be changed.

"Lose here."

That was the message from Ayanokouji. A message that no one else could notice, but that Sakayanagi had surely received. Even in the face of cruel words from the person she loved, she wore a thin smile and closed her eyes. If she didn't, she felt that she would naturally start

shedding tears, just as Hashimoto had.

“The time has come. Hashimoto-kun, please give your confession.”

The school announced that the dialogue was over. Up until this point, Hashimoto had been engaging with Sakayanagi without lying to himself. The answer that was sought.

“Yeah... The trait—”

As Hashimoto tried to get the words out, his voice strained and almost inaudible, Sakayanagi quietly stopped him.

“I see,” she said. “You say you are not the traitor. That’s right. You are not the traitor.”

Hashimoto opened his eyes wide.

“Hey, Sakayanagi...? What are you...”

It was impossible for her to have known how Hashimoto intended to answer that question. After all, he might have admitted that he was a traitor in order to avoid being expelled. Or he might have said, until the end, that he was not the traitor, that he wouldn’t lie to himself and that he would continue to stand on Ryuen’s side. But that no longer mattered.

“...The decision depends on what Hashimoto-kun has actually confessed to, so—”

“That would be tactless. He did indeed say that he is not the traitor,” Sakayanagi cut in. “The answer will be the same if you ask him to confirm his answer once again. And I will not change my answer either. Isn’t that right, Hashimoto-kun?”

“Why’re you...?” asked Hashimoto.

“Because that was the message from Ayanokouji-kun. That is all there is to it.”

That was the conclusion drawn by Sakayanagi. An announcement was once again made, asking her to confirm her choice, which she did. Finally, the decision was handed down.

“...Sakayanagi-san has failed to identify the traitor, so she loses five Life Points.”

The End-of-Year Special Exam, in which there would be more students getting expelled from school, had ended.

Ryuuen Kakeru lost.

And Sakayanagi Arisu had also lost.

Within that contradiction, there were indeed winners and losers.

Postscript

HHEY ALL, Kinugasa here. It's been five months since I last saw you. My hernia has completely healed! ...Or, well, it would be great if I could report that, but in truth, my situation hasn't improved in any way. I managed to get this book out a little bit later than expected somehow or another, but I'm not sure about the next one. At this moment, I feel like I still can't make any promises. I am so deeply sorry!!

I really, really didn't want to make you all wait a long time for Volume 12 after Volume 11 was released, no matter what, so I pushed my body hard to spur myself on. As I'm writing this postscript right now, I'm feeling the recoil from all of that, and I'm far, far more worn out and ragged than right after I finished writing Volume 11. It took me five months to write this book but it was twice as hard as when I wrote in four months' time... I wish I had more time!

I've been trying all kinds of methods through trial and error, like writing while in bed and writing while standing up, but I have yet to find a posture that surpasses "writing while sitting down." (As you'd expect, obviously.) Anyway, there's no point in rambling on about depressing things, so for now I'll just say that I will try to be diligent.

Now, with this volume, Volume 12, we've reached the end of the third semester story. The next volume will be Volume 12.5, spring vacation, which will also mark the end of the second year. For me, the second-year arc feels like it took a long time yet was over in a flash, but how about all of you? What do you think? My daughter, who hadn't even existed before *Classroom* started, is now heading off to school by herself with her randoseru backpack on her back, and it's like, the speed at which the days and months fly by is sinking in, really, really strongly.

I sometimes think that I wrote plenty in that span of time, but then there are times when I look back and wish I had written more about lots of other things, like other sides of the story. I am not going to discuss the contents of Volume 12 this time. It's like, I feel like it would be tactless of me to do something like give off strange hints. I'll talk about it in depth at some other time.

At any rate, I will do my best to deliver the next volume to you as quickly as possible. I may be getting on in years, but my creative urge has not withered away in the slightest. As long as my body can keep up, I would like to keep writing more and more.

The summer will soon be upon us, and I hope that you all take care this year as well to avoid things such as heat stroke. Well, then, everyone, I hope to see you all again before the end of the year. With that, farewell for now!



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